

Promoting Learning

by Dr. Marvin Marshall

OBSERVATIONS FROM LAST YEAR

This article first appeared in the July, 2002, issue of the Gazette on <teachers.net>.

Reflection is a marvelous way to learn.

My April issue, <http://teachers.net/gazette/APR02/marshall.html>, describes the **Raise Responsibility System**--a proactive, noncoercive, and collaborative approach to discipline.

This issue shares a few ideas from observations and staff meetings with teachers from New York City (Manhattan and Harlem) to Los Angeles City who are using the system.

RESPONSIBILITY AS A SKILL

"I learned how to play golf yesterday." "I learned a foreign language last year." "I learned how to make decisions last week." As silly as these sound, there is little difference between them and "I taught responsibility the other day."

Playing golf, learning a foreign language, and making decisions are all skills. **So is learning how to be responsible.**

Teaching the four levels of social development is the foundation that allows teachers and students to speak the same language. It is also an effective approach for a school to have consistency. But the levels cannot be presented with the expectations that students will act on level D--taking the initiative to be responsible--in one lesson. The levels must be part of the daily vocabulary. For example, rather than saying, "I like the way you are standing in line" (**praise for pleasing the teacher by being obedient**), the language of responsibility could be used, such as, "The way you are standing in line shows that you are on level D" (**recognition for expected, responsible behavior**).

More about the **Raise Responsibility System** is available at <http://www.MarvinMarshall.com>

ASKING SELF-REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS IS A SKILL

Instead of asking, "Why are you out of your seat?" asking, "What level is your behavior when you are out of your seat?" is using **reflection** as a teaching and learning opportunity.

Asking questions that prompt students to self-evaluate requires **practicing the use of reflective questioning**. For example, asking, "What would an extraordinary person do in this situation?" challenges and empowers.

ELICITING A CONSEQUENCE GENERATES OWNERSHIP

Letting a student know that level A and B behaviors are not acceptable and **eliciting** a consequence by asking, "What should we do about it?" has the student take responsibility. In contrast, **imposing** punishments generates victimhood thinking because of the lack of ownership in the consequence.

OFFER CHOICES

A student nagged the teacher for permission to go to a special area of the room and kept getting "No" for an answer. One day the teacher finally said, "O.K., if you do your work well." The teacher reported her amazement at how productive the student became. **Choice empowers.**

TRANSITION TIMES ARE RIPE FOR INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOR

Many problems occur when transitioning from one activity to another.

When passing out papers and spending a moment with each student to offer a comment, the teacher gave students the option of either reading silently from a book (readily available) or practicing a skill (in this case handwriting of a letter). These activities were so much more productive and less stressful for the teacher than having the students just WAIT until they received their own paper. **Dead time is deadly time.**

PROCEDURES IN ACTION

Entering a classroom

When students were at the door waiting to enter the classroom after lunch, the teacher explained what to do when entering the room. She created a mindset, a mental picture for the students. After the teacher established expectations by prompting a visualization of what to do, she then affirmed relationships by shaking a hand of each student as the student walked by her to enter the classroom. Right out of Harry Wong's "**The First Days of School**"!

Walking down the hall

Rather than punishing students for walking down the hallway and talking without permission (against directions), students were asked for suggestions. The question put to them was, "What can you do if you have the urge to talk?" The first student to answer volunteered, "Tell yourself not to talk."

The teacher responded that this was a good plan but would not produce success unless a procedure would be attached to it. Suggestions followed: "Keep your lips together" and "Press your tongue to the top of your mouth." Both suggestions were practiced when the teacher said, "Show me what this would look like."

These short, simple procedures were practiced.

The teacher pursued the point about talking. "What if the person next to you talks to you. What can you do?"

"Put your finger to your mouth" was the first response. The teacher then explained how doing this--taking the initiative to remind the student of expected behavior--was at level D, taking initiative.

The teacher then had the students practice and reinforce the procedure by saying, "Show me what it would look like if your walking pal started to talk to you. What would you do?"

Getting attention of the class

Watching a teacher get the attention of the class by saying, "3, 2, 1; eyes on me" was a first for me. I observed another teacher say, "1, 2, 3, 4" and hearing students respond with, "5, 6, 7, 8" was also a successful attention-getter. This was so much more effective than hearing a teacher say, "I'm waiting." "I'm waiting." "I'm waiting." "I'm waiting."

At another time when "3, 2, 1; eyes on me" did not receive the response that the teacher desired, she simply said, "Let's try it again. "3, 2, 1; eyes on me." This approach produced the desired results. The teacher simply challenged the students to do better, and they did.

Reducing noise levels

When a teacher was working with a small group of students and the noise level was too high, **rather than telling** the students to quiet down, she simply taught a procedure. She talked in a soft tone and labeled it, "Volume 1." She raised the volume of her voice and labeled the second level, "Volume 2." She then increased her volume and labeled that one, "Volume 3." After that, she

had all the students repeat, "This is volume 1" in the low level of volume. She modeled volume 2 and had the students say, "This is volume 2" with the corresponding volume. The same went for volume 3. She then reinforced the procedure by having the class repeat, "This is volume 1" with the corresponding volume before she went back working with a group.

Rather than calling out, "Table 1 is too noisy," it was a pleasure to hear the teacher say, "Table 1, show me what level D should sound like." The teacher simply reminded students by having them become aware of their noise level. Students immediately responded lowering the volume of the sound coming from their table.

Dealing with impulsivity

Watching a teacher deal with impulsivity by suggesting the procedure of gasping, bending down, or standing for a moment was watching a real professional in action. The teacher demonstrated that having the student use a procedure to deal with a response to the impulse was more effective than telling the student to "Stop it!"

FROM VICTIMHOOD TO EMPOWERMENT:

One staff discussion demonstrated that a change in mindset would be required for some **teachers** to leave the victimhood realm. Believing that learning is prohibited because students come from unstructured homes, from poverty, or have some other situation that cannot be changed is a mindset of victimhood thinking--on the part of the teacher. Certainly, some home situations diminish optimum learning, but they do not prevent learning.

Regardless of the situation, students can be taught that they can be masters of their fate, that they can be victors rather than victims. Students can be taught that when entering the classroom, they have the power to choose to learn or not to learn. The choice is theirs. I saw a teacher teach this powerful lesson to first graders when she taught students to ask themselves, "What can **I** do in this situation?" The question empowered students with the understanding that choices are always available.

A FINAL REFLECTIVE THOUGHT:

The Japanese carp is also known as koi. This fish has seemingly unlimited growth potential. If you put a koi in a small fish bowl, it will only grow to be two or three inches long. In an average aquarium it, will reach six to ten inches. In a pond, it can grow to be a foot and a half. And if the koi is placed in a lake, where it can really stretch out, it can grow up to 3 feet long. **The size of the fish is proportional to the size of its home.**

It works this way with students, too. They grow according to the size of their world by how we treat them--not physically, but mentally. Traditional approaches of **overpowerment** stunt initiative and responsibility. In contrast, **empowerment** feeds their potential. If we want our civil society to continue as we have inherited it, we must **empower** our students--in contrast to overpowering them.

Responsibility and democracy are inseparable. Neither can be imposed. Implementing the **Raise Responsibility System** is a simple way to promote responsibility for a democratic society.

More is available at http://www.marvinmarshall.com/articles_discipline.htm.

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