

**A Tricky Situation:**  
**Navigating Classroom Management Theory and Practice**

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## Introduction

Each summer, I have the privilege of organizing and supervising the month-long Shad Valley summer program, which is aimed at exceptional high school students from across Canada. This year, one of our “Shads” announced that he was going to direct a half-hour, one-act play as part of our month-end variety show. To put this in perspective, each Shad program has a full schedule bursting with lectures, workshops, recreation and a major engineering/entrepreneurship project, and the Shads are asked to put together the entire variety show in two evenings and what little spare time they are given over the four weeks. Yet, led by the resolute director, a group of students rallied behind the project and put on a fantastic and hilarious play.

Shad Valley provides a good approximation to my ideal classroom environment: the students are self-selected so they are internally motivated, and they learn a valuable curriculum which is taught in a social constructivist manner, with lots of hands-on group projects. We both teach academic content and facilitate students in empowering themselves—my two main goals of teaching. When behavioural issues do arise, we deal with them in dialogue with the student. Indeed, if this essay were about classroom management at Shad Valley, I could conclude it after half a page by noting that I agree with Marvin Marshall (Charles & Senter, 2011) that my students work “gladly, with self-control and responsibility” (pg. 175) because they find Shad Valley satisfying, and with William Glasser (Charles & Senter) that when given choice, an engaging curriculum, quality teaching and a supportive atmosphere, they “achieve quality learning and appropriate behaviour” (pg. 139).

In a sense, I crash-landed from this educational fairy-tale into the reality of public schools with my McGill field experiences, which I have completed at three of the schools with the highest poverty rates in Montreal. My experiences during this time, both observational and instructional, have been of mathematics classrooms where the teacher practices diverge highly from the Shad-ideal, where the students are motivated externally through grades or coercive discipline since they are not particularly engaged by the curriculum. During my first field experience, one class turned into a very negative experience as the teacher tried to establish

control over the class by verbally abusing them; however, in most cases I have taught or observed fairly productive and well-behaved classes in which student learning does take place. Almost everyone I talk with within the system tells me some version of the same message: this is how it must be taught. These students are not motivated enough for the ideal, Shad Valley-like classroom.

I refuse to accept these observations at face value. Perhaps, if introduced to a different educational system with a more engaging curriculum, better teaching and a different motivational structure, the students would thrive! Certainly, there are some teachers and schools who have had success with methods such as Glasser and Marshall recommend (Charles & Senter, 2011), and those theorists make some convincing arguments which I will take up in later sections.

However, I have to admit that the self-styled realists have a point. We teach within an educational and social system which profoundly impacts our students and the ways we can productively teach, and which the classroom teacher has little to no influence over. At the school level, there are a variety of factors which influence teachers' classroom environments, for example, the school's system of external motivation—grades and report cards, detentions and trips to the office—which as Ormrod et al. (2009) explain affect students' intrinsic motivation, often in a detrimental manner. Public schools in Montreal also often stream students into math classes widely seen as the “high” and “low” options, which can send strong messages to students about their potential for achievement (Ormrod et al.).

At the education system level, I find the mathematics curriculum is often less than ideal when measured against the desire for engaged, internally motivated students. The curricula, especially at the Grade 10 and 11 levels, are extensive and even experienced teachers have told me they find it difficult to teach a whole year's curriculum within the time allotted. This leads teachers I have worked with to emphasize the procedural knowledge that is stressed in the assessments, and skim over potential areas of interest to students which would take time to cover properly. The assessments, including a province-wide mandatory test in Grade 10, do

test broader skills in the Situational Problem competency but give more weight to the procedural competency. Other seemingly innocuous policies have a great impact on teachers' classrooms as well. For example, student choice among high schools allows students from families with means to attend out-of-neighbourhood schools, leaving high concentrations of students living in poverty in certain schools and leading to lower success rates (Gorski, 2006).

However, as constrained as I am by institutional and systemic contexts, I am also aware of the considerable evidence that individual teachers have a significant effect on student success, academically and behaviourally (Ormrod et. al, 2009). This suggests that working within the system, there are best practices which arise from theory while remaining tenable for a classroom teacher to implement, and it is thus my goal in this essay to find and articulate these best practices. I will conclude that I want to maintain a friendly student-teacher rapport, engaging instruction and a consistent, reasonable disciplinary system as a backup.

Throughout the paper I will be citing and discussing the works of three key educational theorists: psychiatrist William Glasser, teacher Craig Seganti, and psychologist Fred Jones. If we picture a classroom management spectrum that runs from "fulfil student needs" at the left to "follow rules" on the right, Glasser is on the far left. He contends that students should be positively influenced by an engaging curriculum and that schools should meet their basic needs, not coercively discipline them into cooperating. Glasser's approach is based on his psychiatric practice, in which he observed that all people behave the way they do to meet their needs. Seganti, on the other hand, stands at the right edge of our spectrum. He takes what he calls a reality-based approach, stressing the importance on academic learning and clear, enforceable rules for students, and backs up this approach by noting that it has worked for him in notorious urban schools and juvenile prisons. Jones is somewhere in the middle of the spectrum, as he is concerned both with providing quality instruction to keep students involved with the lesson and with enforcing set limits on behaviour through good teacher body language. Jones bases his theories on large-scale observational studies of "natural teachers".

## Rapport Cards

The first theme I will consider is student-teacher rapport: the relationship between student and teacher that I want and how I will build these relationships with my students. Curiously, of my many experiences building rapport with students, the most instructive one wasn't really my own experience but involved my cooperating teacher and several girls from a class she teaches. The class, a Cultural, Social and Technical (CST) option grade 10 math class, has a high proportion of students with IEPs and other behavioural and academic issues, and there are regular outbursts from many students, including the three girls in this anecdote, who would get into loud arguments with their male classmates, frequently argue with the teacher and occasionally threaten violence against other students. My cooperating teacher made an intense effort to communicate in a friendly and almost motherly way with the girls outside of class time, first in those moments before and after class where they weren't on "math time", then when they started dropping by occasionally before school and at lunch. I have observed this pay off: while the girls' behavioural problems persist outside of class, they understand that my cooperating teacher cares for them and their learning, and are more respectful as a result.

While I find it slightly more difficult to be motherly, I do enjoy having a congenial relationship with students. A saying that I use while training Shad Valley staff sums up my desired relationship with the students I teach: be friendly but not friends. To me, this means that the students and I are on mutually good terms, but our interaction is mostly limited by our overlapping activities: mathematics and perhaps debating or volleyball. We have mutual respect for each other, but a warm, "I like you" respect rather than a cold, "I'm grudgingly aware that you're acting in my best interests" respect. Most importantly, this needs to apply just as much to the students who display poor behaviour in my classes, and this will require effort on my part to reach out to these students. Tom Daly, a San Diego teacher who works with students with serious behavioural issues, offers a perspective that resonates with me (Charles & Senter, 2011), suggesting that we "connect, then coach" (pg. 224) misbehaving students. He explains that reaching out to connect to students deconstructs their view of you as an

adversary, and helps them see you as someone who can help them in their path through education. The three girls described above certainly started to see my cooperating teacher in this way. Connecting with many of your students in this way then helps you manage their behaviour in a positive way in the classroom, creating an environment conducive to academic learning. As well, connecting with students helps develop their own agency: as Daly explains, achieving success in life usually necessitates being likeable and showing respect for authority, which some students need to practice as a skill.

Connecting to students to establish a friendly rapport requires many facets of teacher behaviour. As part of Glasser's goal to help teachers positively influence students, he recommends seven "connecting habits" which help build rapport: caring, listening, supporting, contributing, encouraging, trusting, and befriending (Charles & Senter, 2011). On reflection, I have compiled a list of some my own list of personal practices as a sample of how I interact with students, and these fall under six of Glasser's connecting habits. I practice *caring* by being available for students during their free times, by being approachable, kind and warm to each student, and by being a consistent, predictable presence in their lives. I practice *listening* by making personal connections with students as mentioned above, and by opening my class for more social conversations outside of class time. I practice *supporting* and *encouraging* by not giving up on any student, which means setting a high bar for academic achievement and behaviour and always following up with students who aren't meeting expectations; it also means that I regularly praise students for commendable effort, achievement and behaviour. I practice *trusting* in many ways, and plan to open this up to being openly gay to my students, trusting them with knowledge about me. I practice *contributing* in part by leading extracurricular activities such as the debate club or the volleyball team.

However, I stop short of Glasser's final connecting habit, *befriending*, for two reasons. While Glasser emphasizes befriending students in order to make class fun and exciting for them (Charles & Senter, 2011), I recognize that I will not always be able to engage my students with the curriculum and instruction alone. In

these cases, Seganti reminds us that the teacher must apply some external pressure to motivate students to put in a good effort (Charles & Senter), and as a friend to the students I would lose leverage to apply this pressure. As well, I would like students to respect the boundaries of my own personal life, which becomes more difficult when befriending the students. This is especially true in the modern age of social connectivity when befriending takes on a literal online definition as well as its traditional sense.

I continue to develop my understanding of teacher-student rapport as I continue meeting each new student. One of the open questions on my mind is how I can deepen my connection to students in order to better support students who need a supportive adult to talk to, without taking down the boundaries I describe just above and without becoming a counselor or a parent to them. For example, many students I have observed in field experiences have a difficult life outside of school, which is compounded as they often perceive teachers, focused on the academic curriculum, to be unsympathetic. Often, the reaction to this is to misbehave at school, which reinforces their negative perception of school and teachers. I will continue to question how I can improve my relationship with these students, though I know that this will be very different with each individual student.

### **Instruction Manual**

All the theorists I discuss here agree that quality instruction also contributes greatly to a good classroom environment. Even Craig Seganti, who as noted motivates students with external teacher leverage, encourages teachers to put effort into teaching valuable or interesting information in an engaging way (Charles & Senter, 2011). The link between instruction and classroom management is quite straightforward: engage the students with the lesson, and they will be less likely to display misbehaviours usually caused by distraction or boredom. However, different theorists conceptualize quality instruction in different ways. Seganti notes the benefit of adding a bit of “sparkle” (pg. 203) to a lesson. Due to his focus on non-coercive teacher influence, Glasser stresses using teaching methods that encourage students to want to do work: give students some choice in

topics, assign interesting projects, and support students as they learn. Finally, Jones emphasizes keeping students busy by avoiding time-wasting pauses and breaking up long lectures with quick student activities.

(Charles & Senter)

Theoretically, I largely agree with the recommendations of Glasser (Charles & Senter, 2011), but I find them difficult to implement in my grade 10 and 11 math classrooms. For example, I would love to allow students to choose their own topics of study; however, this is infeasible in practice due to the set curriculum and assessments provided by the provincial education Ministry. The large body of procedural knowledge and abstract nature of mathematics also make it more difficult, though not impossible, to create engaging projects. Unlike other subjects where students can work on newly-developing skills in a large-project context, mathematics students without mastery of the various procedural components quickly find themselves lost in a larger problem or project. My students are currently struggling with a situational problem, a larger problem combining more than one area of mathematics where the route to the solution is not straightforward, since they are not tremendously comfortable with the procedures required for each part of the problem.

For these reasons, I lean towards some of Jones' recommendations for keeping students involved in lessons, which do not require the same level of student choice or interest as those of Glasser. Jones' study highlighted a problem I have also noticed in classroom observations, which is a large amount of time wasted on starting the class, in-class transitions and teachers nagging misbehaving students (Charles & Senter, 2011). I am still developing routines that will help me start the class and transition more quickly, such as checking homework before the bell, taking attendance while students are working and training students to expect certain transitions, and I am confident that my conscious approach will help me devote more time to instruction. As well, I make an effort to be aware of how I speak with students, and to speak positively instead of nagging, since such a positive framing helps improve student attitudes (Lemov, 2010). I do not adapt Jones' suggestion to incentivize students with a preferred activity which they can earn with good behaviour, as this sends a message



that my class is not preferred, adds yet another extrinsic motivational structure where I am trying to build rapport, and could be seen by the older students I teach as patronizing as it is more often used in younger classrooms (Charles & Senter).

While this essay is too brief for an in-depth discussion of my instruction techniques, I would describe my overall approach as trying to engage the students as much as possible while ensuring they have a chance to learn the curricular material. Along the lines of Seganti (Charles & Senter, 2011), I try to add humour and charisma to my lessons, though students laugh at how bad my jokes are more often than the jokes themselves. As well, thinking back to some teachers I had as a student who didn't seem to know the material very well, I try to demonstrate a good command of the subject material so that students feel they can learn something from me. In the next few years, I would like to experiment with incorporating more project-based learning into math classrooms, building off the situational problems I have given to students on this field experience. I would also like to explore flipping the classroom, an instructional technique which pushes expository instruction to when the students are at home, allowing in-depth discussion or activities in class in lieu of lectures.

### **Discipline Matters**

I have never enjoyed or really been in favour of punishing students, and am fortunate that with the students I have taught I have rarely had to. However, observing my cooperating teacher's CST class described above made it obvious that something had to be done to prevent misbehaviour and respond to it once it does occur. A turning point moment for my thinking on this issue was an aside that one student made to me when several other students were misbehaving. She turned to me and said that students like teachers better who can control their classes. At first, I thought this worked the other way round; as I discuss in the section on rapport, students behave better for teachers who are better liked. However, I am now convinced that this runs both ways, and I hold that within the current educational milieu, a teacher with a reasonable, clear and consistent

discipline scheme is creating a positive framework for interactions with students and improving learning outcomes.

There is plenty of dispute over this which is worth discussing. Theorists such as William Glasser argue that coercive discipline methods undercut the teacher-student relationship, are ineffective in changing behaviour, and reduce the internal motivation or responsibility that teachers should desire (Charles & Senter, 2011). I find these well-supported by theory, and in more ideal educational environments such as Shad Valley they justify a very different system of behaviour management. However, in the context of today's public schools I take issue with each argument. First, I do not notice a significant detriment to the relationship between students and teachers who consistently enforce discipline. Students have been socialized to understand discipline to be part of the school system rather than a function of any individual teacher. Indeed, in my experience it is the teachers who do not enforce discipline who find it difficult to earn students' respect, as noted by the perceptive student above.

I am more sympathetic to the second argument, as it often seems that teachers continue to discipline the same students over and over again without engendering behavioural change. However, there is evidence that some common discipline tactics such as verbal reprimands, logical consequences and time-outs can improve student behaviour (Ormrod et al., 2009), and it is important to recall that such change should not be expected to happen quickly. In any case, while student rapport and engaging teaching are in my experience more effective tools for promoting a good classroom environment, these do not magically establish themselves in a classroom at the start of the year nor work perfectly with each student, and so I find that discipline is necessary as a backup system necessary to establish initial control.

Seganti has a good response to the third argument regarding motivation. As noted above, it is not always possible for me to encourage internal motivation in my students by making my classes fun, but even if it were, Seganti would argue that putting motivation before work is like putting the cart in front of the horse.

Instead, he says, students are well motivated when they achieve a measure of academic success, which follows hard work. For students who have found little educational success in the past, this hard work must initially be obtained by teacher leverage via a discipline system. (Charles & Senter, 2011) I have both felt the deep satisfaction of achieving something and seen this in others, and this strikes me as a very good source of internal motivation for students when it can be activated.

The form and implementation of a discipline system is also very important, and I will not defend teachers who assign detentions on whims or enforce irrational rules. While I have not codified a specific discipline program for my teaching, I have identified a few key aspects from theory and practice which have a great impact on the effectiveness of a teacher's discipline system. The first, as Seganti points out, is that rules must be in place for a reason supporting student learning, and must be clearly explained and justified to the students (Charles & Senter, 2011), with the underlying justification that each student's compliance helps all other students learn. If I implement a seating plan, for example, I will explain that this is a non-disruptive way of preventing some behaviour issues caused by students' proximity to their friends or other students who provoke them, which could disrupt learning. The second, as Ormrod et al. recommend (2009), is to react to misbehaviours using logical consequences when possible. For example, I recently reorganized the seating plan for one of my classes due to students being inattentive and chatting with one another. This consequence both served as a deterrent for future talking and naturally reduced the chance of reoccurrence.

The third factor is to implement a consistent and reasonably escalating system of enforcement. If a minimal intervention such as eye contact or a brief verbal reprimand, as recommended by Marvin Marshall (Charles & Senter, 2011), does not work, I move up to a logical consequence such as a time-out until the student has regained their composure (Ormrod et al., 2009). If behaviour continues or the student is defiant or hostile, I make a consequence statement of the form, "If you do not do X within Y time, you will receive Z consequence," offering the student one final clear way to de-escalate the situation. If the condition is not met, I always follow

up with the stated consequence. Throughout this process, I emphasize that it is the behaviour rather than the student that is undesirable, and explain why this behaviour is undesirable (Ormrod et al.). For larger or frequently recurring issues, I work with administration, other teachers and the student's parents or guardians to formulate a common plan to manage the issue.

Like student rapport and instruction, I continue to develop my thoughts and practices surrounding my disciplinary system, and I will adapt this to each new context. One idea several theorists support which I would like to explore is involving students in setting standards for the class. While I accept that it may help improve student buy-in and accountability to themselves rather than myself, as Glasser and others argue (Charles & Senter, 2011), I am dubious as to the extent which most efforts to involve students in collaborative rule-making are actually soliciting genuine student input. We have done collaborative rule-making at our Shad Valley programs, but it always struck me that we were mainly prompting the students to give us the rules they had been socialized into by previous schooling, which seems to avoid the point entirely.

## **Conclusion**

At the beginning of this essay I described a debate between a theoretical ideal classroom and the practical reality I have observed during my field experiences, and inquired where I situated myself as a teacher in that debate. In the end, I find myself somewhere in the middle. I cannot side with certain teachers I have observed who are reflexively un-reflective, convinced that any lack in students' success is due to factors outside the classroom. Yet at the same time I cannot deny that such important factors exist both within the system and within students' lives that make attention to our own teaching context tremendously important, and that make some theoretically favourable practices untenable in real classrooms. To resolve these tensions, I have looked within the elements of classroom management to find best practices supported by theory and feasible in my secondary math classroom, and concluded that I want to be "friendly but not friends" with my students, deliver

high-quality, engaging instruction to keep students hooked, and construct a rational, clearly understood discipline plan which I implement consistently but humanely.

However much we can learn from generalizations, though, students in some ways remain wonderful mysteries that remind us that we are teaching unique and growing people rather than ticks on our attendance sheets. I was reminded at lunch today that a teacher can never quite know what will motivate a student by a boy in my grade 10 math class. This student is part of a very engaged group who often come in to discuss the math homework at lunch, but he usually plays video games on his phone rather than joining the discussion. Though he is friendly and not disruptive in class, his test marks haven't been so good. Today, as I have mentioned, I gave the class a situational problem which frustrated many students. To my surprise, this boy was so engaged by the problem that he was not only discussing it with his friends at lunch, but leading the discussion—an animated and passionate display that was a surprise and an absolute pleasure to watch. I shared a smile with my cooperating teacher; I had notched up one more small success.

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