

Assuming the Best

Rick Smith and Mary Lambert

Students want to learn both content and appropriate behavior. And they can only do it in a safe, structured classroom.

When Paul Kilkenny, a mentor teacher in East San Jose, California, works with teachers, he occasionally finds himself in the role of cheerleader. He notes,

My teachers work with kids who are often in tough situations, and the kids can bring that same toughness into the classroom. When the teachers find themselves focusing extensively on student misbehavior, sometimes my job is simply to remind them to continually assume the best about their students.

Assuming the best is essential for long-term learning and positive connections to take place in our classrooms. When it comes to classroom-management, there are no exotic new consequences that teachers can use to get students on task. The most effective classroom management comes in the form of strategies that prevent acting out before it occurs. And those strategies arise primarily from assuming that our students want to be here, want to participate, and, specifically, want to learn good behavior. When we internalize and act from this assumption, our students behave better and learn more.

The Invisible Contract

Whenever students walk into the classroom, assume they hold an invisible contract in their hands, which states, "Please teach me appropriate behavior in a safe and structured environment." The teacher also has a contract, which states, "I will do my best to teach you appropriate behavior in a safe and structured environment."

This approach can radically change our perspective on student misbehavior. To illustrate, in the beginning of the school year, Mark decides to test his teacher, whom we will call Mrs. Allgood. Mark looks at his invisible contract and thinks, "This contract is important. Let's see whether Mrs. Allgood is going to uphold her end of it." So Mark breaks a small rule to see what will happen. If Mrs. Allgood is harsh or punitive to Mark for breaking the rule, he says to himself, "This class isn't *safe*; she isn't honoring the contract." However, if Mrs. Allgood ignores Mark and he gets away with breaking the rule or if she enforces it inconsistently, Mark says to himself, "This class isn't *structured*; she isn't honoring the contract."

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Either way, Mark is not satisfied. So he thinks to himself, "To communicate the importance of this contract and give the teacher another chance, I'll break a slightly larger rule." He will continue to break larger and larger rules until Mrs. Allgood comes through consistently with both safety and structure. When she's consistent over time, Mark says to himself, "Oh good, she's honoring the contract. Now I can relax and focus on learning."

The bottom line is that when students test us, they want us to pass the test. They are on our side rooting for us to come through with safety and structure. When students act out, they are really saying, "We don't have the impulse control that you have. We are acting out so that you will provide us with safety and structure—be soft yet firm—so that we can learn the behavior we need to learn to be happy and successful."

However, few students approach their teachers and directly ask to be taught behavior in a safe and structured environment. What, then, is the justification for this assumption?

Our Internal Radios

Imagine that students have radio tuners in their heads and are continually tuning in to a myriad of radio stations that deal with what it means to be a youth. These stations differ for students of different ages and cultural settings, but they all focus on fitting in, being cool, achieving short-term gratification, and enjoying consequence-free behavior. Often, many of our students will narrate these radio noises out loud, as though these signals express the truth of who the students are. They will entertain such ideas as "I don't care about learning," "My friends' opinions of me matter more than my own or my teachers' opinions," "Fitting in and looking good matter more than being good," or "Why bother to try?"

Now imagine that students have radio beacons in their hearts. These beacons pour out the same basic message over and over again:

We want to learn and participate. We want to be positive. Please teach us appropriate behavior as well as content. Please know that we often want to narrate the noises in our heads, but we need you to honor our hearts at the same time. Please be compassionate, allowing us our wants as you honor our needs.

When we internalize the assumption that students want to learn and participate, we begin to see that beneath their complaints about the lesson, homework, or seating chart, students are saying one thing: "Please care for us today." As we honor this message, without belittling or marginalizing the noises that students narrate, we can get our message through the noise of their heads into the receptive place in their hearts. Our communication becomes clear and kind, and our enthusiasm becomes contagious.

We teachers have the same radio tuners and beacons as our students do. Regardless of what our experience is when we come to school—whether we are

feeling ready, regretting lack of sleep, or mulling over tensions at home—we can reach through our own mental noise and our students' noise and touch them heart to heart.

This will affect all our communications with students, especially those that address inappropriate behavior. This softening of our communication enables us to be firm when necessary, but in a way that invites cooperation rather than arguments and protests. Our students' behavior will begin to reflect these positive assumptions. What shifts is the *how*—the manner in which we communicate. Our students begin to feel that we are on their side, even as we address the *what*—their behavior. By holding our ground with our own radio noises ("These kids don't care." "They're just lazy." "Why bother?"), we can hold our ground with student misbehavior in a way that is both firm and soft, corrective and inviting. In addition, as we exercise this "muscle of positivity," we avoid the burnout so often associated with teaching tough kids. We create a self-fulfilling prophecy of appropriate and engaging student participation.

Positive Strategies, Positive Results

The strategies that follow can improve our interactions with students, create classrooms that honor students' need for safety and structure, and promote student learning.

Strategy 1: Use Volume, Tone, and Posture

When we assume that students want to learn behavior, we can readily see that we are here to *teach* behavior. This changes our interactions with students. For example, Mrs. Allgood is teaching a lesson; in the back of the classroom, Mark is disturbing his neighbors by showing them his new *Sports Illustrated*. He needs to stop. If Mrs. Allgood assumes that she's only here to teach content—to stay on task—she will go so quickly through the discipline piece that Mark will probably not understand, and so he will continue to act out. Some teachers jokingly refer to this as "drive-thru discipline."

On the other hand, if Mrs. Allgood assumes that she is here to teach behavior, she will pause in her lesson and address Mark's behavior. Her first option is to walk up to him and quietly state her request: "Please put that away and have a seat." If that's not possible because of time or furniture constraints, she will shift from "content mode" to "behavior mode," facing Mark squarely as she softens her voice and lowers her tone. Knowing that Mark is committed to both learning appropriate behavior and wanting to look good in front of his friends, she won't publicly humiliate him. Her shift in volume, tone, and posture will firmly but softly communicate what she expects of him, deescalating possible tension.

By taking these extra moments to address Mark's behavior, Mrs. Allgood will have more time to focus on teaching content because Mark will most likely get it the first time around. And if he says something under his breath, she knows that she can let him have the last word. It's his way of saving face as he refocuses on learning content.

Strategy 2: Implement the Two-by-Ten Strategy

Raymond Wlodkowski¹ did extensive observations of student behavior, cataloguing student time in and out of seat as well as the types, instances, and severity of student disruptions. In particular, he researched a strategy called "Two-by-Ten." Here, teachers focus on their most difficult student. For two minutes each day, 10 days in a row, teachers have a personal conversation with the student about anything the student is interested in, as long as the conversation is G-rated. Wlodkowski found an 85-percent improvement in that one student's behavior. In addition, he found that the behavior of all the other students in the class improved.

Martha Allen, an adjunct professor at Dominican University's Teacher Credential Program in San Rafael, California, asked her student teachers to use the Two-by-Ten Strategy with their toughest student. The results? Almost everyone reported a marked improvement in the behavior and attitude of their one targeted student, and often of the whole class. Many teachers using the Two-by-Ten Strategy for the first time have had a similar corroborating experience: Their worst student became an ally in the class when they forged a strong personal connection with that student.

This can be counterintuitive. But the students who seemingly deserve the most punitive consequences we can muster are actually the ones who most need a positive personal connection with their teacher. When they act out, they are letting us know that they are seeking a positive connection with an adult authority figure and that they need that connection first, before they can focus on learning content.

The teachers whom Paul Kilkenny mentors in East San Jose regularly use the Two-by-Ten Strategy with their challenging students. "Not only does it help with the toughest students," says Paul, "but also it helps the teachers remember their humanity as they attempt to survive and thrive in the classroom."

Strategy 3: Break Things into Steps

Just as students often need complex math problems broken down into small, digestible lessons, so they need small, manageable steps when it comes to learning behavior and classroom procedures.

For example, if Mark has a hard time putting his art supplies away on time, instead of punishing him Mrs. Allgood can meet with him, and together they can practice putting the supplies away. Instead of one step—"Put your things away"—the teacher can guide the student through several steps: "Pick up the scissors and place it in the scissors tray; return the colored paper to the stack in the back of the room; put your project in your folder." By practicing each of the steps, Mark has a better sense of what to do and is more likely to succeed when Mrs. Allgood announces clean-up time to the class.

Instead of throwing up our hands and saying, "These kids don't care" or "These kids can't succeed," we should assume they are committed to success in both content and behavior. We can then put our energy into breaking down the behaviors we want to see into simple steps so that students clearly understand what we expect of them.

Strategy 4: Use Behavior Rubrics

Rubrics work great for content—and equally great for procedures and behavior. For example, if a particular student is inappropriately loud, Mrs. Allgood can provide the student with a 1–5 *volume rubric*. A 1 would indicate a whisper, a 3 would indicate a normal conversational tone, and a 5 would indicate a yell. The student can practice all five numbers, and the teacher can then assign different numbers to different school and social situations: A 1 would be appropriate if the student asked a classmate to borrow a pencil while the rest of the class was engrossed in a writing task; a 3 would be appropriate for students conversing during group work; a 5 would be appropriate on the playground. Rubrics work well for many classroom behaviors, such as lining up, settling down to learn, and getting ready for dismissal.

Strategy 5: Use Visuals

Visuals also serve as great road maps for student success. If, for example, students have difficulty getting their textbooks and homework on their desks when the bell rings at the beginning of class, Mrs. Allgood can use visuals to clarify exactly what she expects. She can use a diagram, drawing, or photograph of the surface of the desk, with the textbook open to the proper page and the homework on the upper left-hand corner of the desk. At the start of class, using PowerPoint or an overhead, she can flash the picture on the board or screen in front of the room, giving the students "17 seconds to be ready to start." Visuals work well for such activities as setting up labs, putting supplies away, and clarifying the school dress code.

More Than a Smile

For many teachers, being positive means putting on a smile, pretending to like a particular student, or going through the motions of using strategies purportedly designed to enhance the classroom environment. In contradistinction, by assuming the best about our students—particularly in situations in which that assumption seems most implausible—we exercise a muscle that is real and lasting.

Assuming the best is an underlying orientation that enables us to treat both our students and ourselves with respect and dignity. It helps us understand that when students act out, they are sending us a message that they want a positive connection. Then we can start to see "discipline moments" as opportunities for teaching an essential piece that students want to learn.

Endnote

¹Wlodkowski, R. J. (1983). *Motivational opportunities for successful teaching* [Leader's Guide]. Phoenix, AZ: Universal Dimensions.

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