

Experimenting with Behavior Management Approaches Within Disruptive CLT Classes

Samuel King

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses two different approaches to managing the disruptive behavior of two first year English discussion classes in the Center for English Discussion Class (EDC) at Rikkyo University. A reflective journal was kept for the duration of this project for the purposes of monitoring and reflecting upon the effectiveness of the two separate behavior management approaches (dubbed *authoritative* and *big brother*) utilized in the two separate classes. Both behavior management approaches and their perceived efficacy are discussed. Other factors that may have influenced the behavioral changes that took place over time are also considered. The paper concludes with a consideration of the effectiveness of the journaling process itself as a tool for monitoring and reflection within the classroom.

INTRODUCTION

Behavior management is not typically thought to be a concern in higher education, perhaps owing to the fact that, in general, behavior management is not often an issue once students make the transition from secondary education to tertiary settings. However, in the rare instances when behavioral issues do become a concern within the post-secondary classroom, the negative effects of a disruptive classroom can be just as consequential to teaching and learning as in any other non-tertiary setting (Hirschy & Braxton, 2004). Central to the many practical and affective aims of Rikkyo University's EDC course is for students to "develop a positive attitude toward engaging in [English] discussions with their peers", and to be able to "participate in extended discussion of 16 minutes or more in length" (Hurling, 2012, p. 1-2). For students to be able to achieve these aims, (relative to their ability level) a considerable amount of concerted effort, maturity, and attentiveness is required of students. Disruptive behavior in the form of inattentiveness, overly-boisterous behavior, as well as rude and aggressive behavior, although rare in the EDC course, is likely to detract from these achieving these aims, or, at the very least, result in a negative learning environment.

For the two classes that were the subject of this journaling project, the range of disruptive behaviors present during class time most certainly resulted in a compromised learning experience. The reason for such behaviors is not the concern of this paper, although I suspect a possible combination of shyness, lack of maturity, mix of genders, past negative experiences learning English, as well as peer influence would all be likely factors. Regardless, it was in these two classes that I had first experienced disruptive behaviour in the tertiary EFL classroom severe enough that I had to admit the aims of the course were being compromised. However, being an ex-state school teacher in Australia, this was certainly not the first time I had encountered problem behaviour. And so, I became interested in the current project as a result of my experiences managing disruptive behaviour in my past career.

Prior experience had taught me that numerous effective approaches to dealing with disruptive behavior in the classroom exist, despite the fact that practitioners and theorists continue to disagree as to a single best approach. My challenge for this project was to translate the approaches that I had found effective in my past career to my new teaching environment. Considering the fact that both of the disruptive classes I was teaching were disruptive in roughly equal yet different ways, I decided to adopt different behavior management approaches for each of them.

Below is a description of the two classes in which the project took place in the form of direct extracts from journal entries recorded in week 5 of the 14 week EDC course (beginning of the observation project).

Class A - week 5 journal entry extract

Class description: This class consists of eight male students in their first year. All of the students display disengaged attitudes towards the class due to their lack of participation throughout all aspects of lessons so far, as well as in their general unresponsiveness towards teacher instructions. Two of the students (hereafter known as 'Y' and 'H') exhibit more severe behavior issues (aggressive body language, verbal challenges to teacher, excessive off-topic talking in their native language) throughout all lesson stages that significantly disrupt the class, thus compromising the aims of the EDC course.

Behavior management approach: Class disruption due to behavioural challenges has been an issue since week 1 of the course. Up until now (week 5), I have taken minimal steps towards managing/correcting problem behavior. However, unconsciously, I would say that my behaviour management style in this class has naturally been somewhat authoritative or 'top down'. I have had some success at correcting/mitigating problem behavior by directly addressing it i.e verbally telling students that they should correct their problem behavior, if and when it arises. From week 5 onwards I intend to continue with this approach (hereafter referred to as the 'authoritative approach').

Class B - week 5 journal entry extract

Class description: This class consists of six males and two females in their first year. All of the students display disengaged attitudes towards the class and its aims. The two female students seem to lack motivation, whereas all of the male students are constantly joking and distracting one another throughout all phases of the lesson. Attempts to motivate the class by encouraging them with praise have been met with disregard, for the most part. The male students, in particular, seem more interested in using class time to socialise and entertain one other.

Behavior management approach: Since the beginning of the course, most of the students in the class have largely ignored my attempts to manage their behavior. The times when I am least successful is when I attempt to counter their disruptive behavior by verbally admonishing them. On the few occasions that I have attempted to joke with them they have reacted with curiosity or have otherwise given me their attention. It is my intention to manage their behavior by building rapport with them by using attempts at humor (hereafter referred to as the 'big brother' approach).

It should be noted that, as both classes were taught within the same course, besides the different approaches to behavior management, all other aspects of the lessons for both classes (lesson content, activities, tests etc.) were conducted in the same way.

The journaling process

A reflective journal was kept for the duration of this project (weeks 5-14 of a single semester of the EDC course). Journal entries were recorded weekly, immediately following each class. Each journal entry sought to answer the following questions:

1. What is happening and why?
2. What changed/didn't change?
3. What strategies could influence future behavior/performance?

A slightly modified version of the above three question format used in my journal entries has been used to form the structure of the following discussion section:

1. What was happening and why?
2. What changed/didn't change?
3. What strategies were perceived to influence behavior/performance?

Inspiration for the method of journaling came from Murphy's (2014) three cognitive dimensions of reflective teaching, as did the question format of my journal entries (modified) ;

DISCUSSION

Class A

What was happening and why?

From the beginning of the course the class atmosphere was tense. All students appeared to show extremely reluctant attitudes towards participating in class activities by being overly slow to respond to class instructions, using minimal English during pair and group activities, and by generally exhibiting anti-social behavior that was at times frequently disrespectful and/or challenging towards the teacher. There appeared to be a hierarchy within the class within which two students (Y and H) were situated at the top, and from whom the other students took behavioral cues. This meant that as either Y or H's behavior became disruptive, the other students in the class would either copy them or display similar disruptive behavior on par with their own. Examples of problematic behavior from Y included sitting on desks during standing pair work activities, sitting on chairs back-to-front during seated activities, loudly banging desks at random moments of the lesson, and speaking back to the teacher in Japanese in an aggressive manner when spoken to.

As mentioned, the behavior of other students (although never reaching the same level of disruption) became energized by witnessing Y's behavior, and in turn, became increasingly disorderly. The other group leader, H, would display disruptive behavior by frequently making inappropriate and distracting comments in Japanese during class time. For instance, during group discussions H would loudly exclaim "*mendokusai*" ["I couldn't be bothered"]. Other times H would loudly shout "*urusa!*" ["Noisy! / Shut up!"]. On these occasions the other students would usually react with laughter and often lose focus on the task at hand. The cumulative effect of both Y and H's behavior, in combination with the carry-on effects of their behavior on the rest of the students, appeared to contribute to the gradual deterioration of the quality and productivity of lessons.

What changed/didn't change? What strategies were perceived to influence behavior/performance?

From the moment that I implemented the *authoritative* approach, the class dynamic began to change for the better. If I perceived a particular behavior to be disruptive or compromising to the aims of the course, rather than ignoring it or letting it pass as I had tended to do in the past, I would make it known that such behavior was not appropriate by addressing offending students directly and assertively. Specifically, I would draw the students' attention to the fact that every lesson, in addition to receiving a score on attendance, the class quiz and their overall communicative ability, they were also receiving a score for participation. I frequently reminded them that disruptive behavior would impact this upon this score. I reiterated this message almost every lesson from week 5 onwards (including in the online class comments which were made available after the lesson each week).

By week 8, incidents of disruptive behavior were greatly minimized resulting in a classroom environment that was more conducive to that of a successful learning environment and in which the aims of the course could be successfully carried out. I found that when I would address the inappropriate behavior of either Y or H specifically, that classroom behavioral issues were minimized overall. In fact, by around week 7, Y was no longer seeking to draw the kind of attention to himself that he tended to earlier in the course and, for the most part, he became a compliant and amicable class member. H, on the other hand, initially resisted my attempts to directly counter his inappropriate comments by either sulking, or alternatively, becoming defiant.

Around week 9 of the course, I would purposefully individually praise both Y and H, particularly not long after moments when I had admonished them for disruptive behavior earlier in the lesson. Over time, this resulted in increased positive attitudes from the both of them (especially H), which noticeably increased the overall behavior of the class. By week 14, the standard of behavior and overall class atmosphere was markedly improved from earlier on in the course, and in some cases, arguably better than that of other classes that I was teaching.

Class B

What was happening and why?

From week 1, Class B was in a state of disorder. A few of the 6 male students appeared to know each other and were thus comfortable in each other's presence. However, all of the male students' interactions with one another during class time were overly boisterous to the point that it was often difficult for me to contain their energy enough to successfully conduct our lessons in the first few weeks. All of class members (including the female students) appeared disinterested in engaging with the class content. It was clear that their main focus was on socializing amongst themselves as well as on continuing running jokes. The female students took on a spectator role in relation to the male students and their behavior.

My attempts to direct the energy of the class in the first few weeks was largely unsuccessful. Before week 5 I had attempted to manage their behavior by using a combination of reprimands as well as praise, including drawing notice towards the generally low scores that most students were receiving in regular lessons and in tests. The students' disposition towards myself was never hostile or challenging. Instead, they appeared largely disinterested in my presence. It was particularly challenging to hold their attention during times when I was attempting to relay instructions or offer feedback. I would often have to repeat instructions, oftentimes by stopping activities in order to relay similar information. By week 5, my frustration was growing and the students appeared to be becoming aware of it. I became concerned that the relationship between the students and myself might become antagonistic, and my fear was that a compromised relationship in combination with their already overly boisterous energy would soon prove untenable.

What changed/didn't change? What strategies were perceived to influence behavior/performance?

I had varying levels of success with the *big brother* approach in Class B. My initial strategy for its implementation was to build rapport with the students to the extent that I might increase my influence over them, and ultimately have more success in controlling their rambunctiousness. By week 5, I had observed their social dynamic over some time, and was sufficiently aware of their style of humor and in-joking, that I felt confident to insert myself into their interplay. I began by making jokes of my own about the kind of topics that they would often joke about (the discussion phrases, the characters in the textbook, aspects of English pronunciation, etc.). Initially, my attempts were met with curiosity, as, I imagine, their perception of my disposition towards them

and/or who I was appeared to change.

By around week 7 or 8 however, I was regularly joking with them and, on occasion, sharing their enthusiasm. This in turn meant that I was able to hold their attention better than I had prior to week 5 as I had gained a greater level of acceptance from them. The more attention I was able to get from them when giving instructions and giving feedback the less time was wasted by not having to reiterate important instructions or key points to successfully navigating the course. This change appeared to contribute to students' increased ability to meet course aims. By week 14, the rapport between the students and myself was much improved, as was their ability to concentrate on paying attention to instructions and receive feedback. However, right up until the end of the course, the energy level from students remained too high, which resulted in an inadequate level of focus from students.

CONCLUSION

While behavioral issues were minimized within both classes from week 5 onwards, of the two approaches to behavior management, I had more success with Class A and the *authoritative* approach. The main reason for the superior success of the *authoritative* approach, came down to the fact that I was able to exert more control over the class in a shorter amount of time. I was able to maintain this control by utilizing a combination of admonishment as well as praise. Similar to my experiences with behavior management in the state school system, this balance seemed to instill a sense of respect and trust within the students, and to indicate to them that I had their best interests in mind. In turn, they displayed more respect towards me and their fellow class members, as well as a willingness to comply with the aims of the course.

In comparison to the *authoritative* approach, the control over disruptive behavior from week 5 that I gained with the *big brother* approach was more gradual, noticeably plateaued around week 11 of the course, and never reached a level of perceived efficacy comparable to that of Class A. I theorize, based on my observations through this journaling project, and also due to my past experience dealing with disruptive behavior in the classroom, that students must perceive there to be an imbalance of power between themselves and the teacher. I believe students will naturally acquiesce to this imbalance of power, if, and when, they perceive that that can trust that the teacher has their best interests in mind. This project in particular has taught me that building rapport with students by attempting to 'get on their level' can be helpful, as long as it does not compromise the perceived power imbalance in the classroom.

Finally, the process of keeping a reflective journal proved helpful in this project. It has been suggested that keeping a teaching journal has numerous benefits for teachers interested in improving their practice, including keeping track of persistent problems in the classroom, referencing changes over time in student performance, as well as raising issues and questions that one might wish to address in future lessons (Farrell, 2007). Certainly over the duration of this project, being able to reference and reflect upon instances of student behavior, as well as that of my own better enabled me to enact upon opportunities, and realize patterns that I wouldn't have otherwise noticed.

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