

GLEN PEARSALL

CLASSROOM DYNAMICS

Practical strategies for addressing
off-task behaviour and creating
positive classrooms

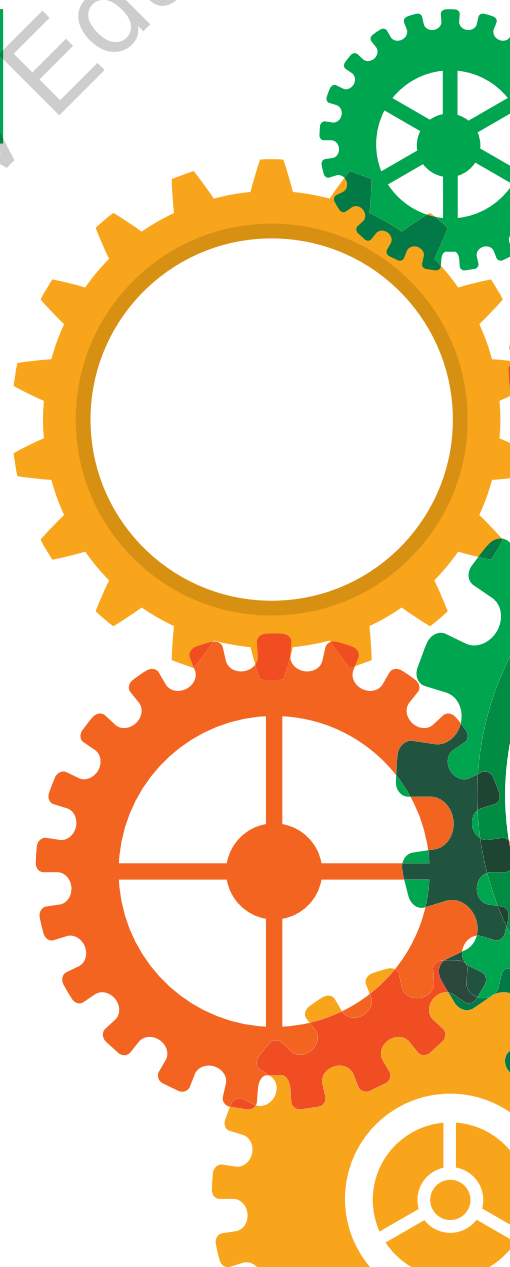


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Introduction

IN MY SECOND SEMESTER OF TEACHING, I STARTED AN ARGUMENT WITH A STUDENT BY simply asking him to close a door he had just passed through.

‘Why do I have to?’ was his immediate response.

‘There’s a wasp nest over there and I don’t want them to end up in the classroom.’

The student protested that wasn’t his responsibility: ‘I didn’t open it.’

I pointed out to him that he did use the doorway though, and was in fact the last one through it, so could he please close it?

‘No,’ he replied, ‘I don’t think even wasps would want to come to this class – this book is so boring.’ This got a ripple of laughter from the students seated near the door leading him to repeat his comment louder. He added a couple of other reasons why a wasp would find my class unappealing. By now every student in the room was listening and this seemed to give him confidence in his defiance: ‘I am not wasting my time getting up and going all the way over to close the door when the wasps aren’t even going to come in!’

I took the bait and got dragged into a long back and forth about whether or not wasps were likely to enter the classroom through an open door. Finally, exasperated, I pointed out to him that while we had been talking two wasps had indeed flown into the room.

‘I know, that’s why I left it open – so we could let the wasps out.’

I had absolutely no idea what to say to that. My teacher training hadn’t exactly prepared me for a situation like this. Indeed, while we covered educational theory, curriculum delivery and general principles of building a positive classroom, all the nuances of instructional practice were not something I had studied. I had to develop my toolkit for dealing with off-task behaviour through trial and error.

There was a lot of error.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with this. Good learning is not about avoiding mistakes. It is rather about making *high-quality* mistakes. Instead of making the same errors over and over again, you want to make new errors. You want to find new gaps

in your practice, stumble as you try new things and use this as feedback to constantly refine what you are doing.

As with most teachers I know, it was my colleagues who helped me most in this process. The teachers I worked with gave me lots of practical strategies for keeping my classes positive and engaged. Much of the best advice didn't come from formal training but through quick chats at the photocopier or debriefing about a challenging class at the lunchroom table. What stood out about this advice was that it was so practical: small, concrete adjustments to my teaching that I could put into action immediately.

However, the problem with this process of trial and error is that it is so time intensive. It can take years to build up a toolkit of strategies for addressing all the complexities of the behavioural issues you encounter in the classroom – and even longer to practise and refine their execution so that they suit you and your school setting. Moreover, this time-consuming process doesn't ever really end; experienced teachers will often encounter a student or a whole class that has them reviewing their technique all over again.

Unfortunately, time is usually what most teachers lack. Teachers are notoriously time-poor, often working many more hours than they are paid, with new responsibilities being added to the role seemingly every year. This lack of time often leads to the paradoxical situation where the urgent demands of the everyday classroom swamp the important work of learning how to reduce these urgent demands. It is hard to do a deep dive into the research around dealing with off-task behaviour when you are trying to deal with and follow up on the consequences of the off-task behaviour in your class.

This can be emotionally taxing. It might be reassuring to know that, in the long run, you will master ways to de-escalate emotional outbursts from students. However, that doesn't always make it less stressful in the moment – or any less embarrassing that their screaming can be heard in the classroom next door through the thin partition wall.

Classroom dynamics has been written to address this issue. It has been designed to accelerate the process of building up an effective toolkit for creating and maintaining positive classrooms. Echoing my mentor teachers' advice to me, it offers you concrete tips that can be implemented *immediately* with your students. Moreover, it is designed as a single volume resource that you can use to survey the best research about how to create engaged and independent learners so that you can quickly get to the heart of issues that might be affecting your students' learning.

This emphasis on practical quick-to-learn and apply strategies is reflected in the book's structure.

HOW TO USE THIS TEXT

Part 1: Practical strategies for dealing with off-task behaviour

If you are having difficulty managing a student, group of students or even an entire class's behaviour, start here. This section explores a series of practical responses to students who are 'off task'. They are loosely organised according to the intensity of the teacher intervention required to implement them, from subtle low-key reminders to more overt directives, to (the often time-intensive) strategies for addressing student resistance, resolving conflict and establishing a whole-school response to these behaviours.

- ◆ In **Chapter 1: Low-key interventions** we focus on quick techniques for subtly encouraging students back on task.
- ◆ In **Chapter 2: Giving explicit instructions** we explore the use of brief verbal interventions for reminding students of your expectations.
- ◆ In **Chapter 3: Pivoting** we dive deeper into scripts for avoiding arguments and redirecting students back to their learning.
- ◆ In **Chapter 4: Talking it out** we discuss strategies for resolving emerging issues and de-escalating conflict.
- ◆ In **Chapter 5: Seeking support** we focus on advice on how to effectively elicit support from colleagues and school leaders.

For new teachers, this section offers a detailed road map for how to steer students back to their learning with as little fuss as possible. For more experienced teachers, these chapters might serve as a reminder of overlooked strategies or subtle refinements you can make to established techniques.

Part 2: Understanding entrenched off-task behaviour

No strategy works in every situation. You need to develop ways to understand and respond to deep-seated behavioural issues that are hard to shift. If the strategies featured in Part 1 of this resource are ineffective, you need to look deeper at what is driving this entrenched behaviour. This section offers ways to both get a better sense of what might be driving the challenging behaviour of specific students and how to tailor an individual response to these needs.

- ◆ In **Chapter 6: What is the purpose of off-task behaviour?** we delve into the use of functional behaviour analysis to better understand and respond to patterns of challenging and 'rusted on' behaviours.

- ◆ In **Chapter 7: Tailoring interventions for individual student needs** we will walk through how to differentiate interventions for students who generally *can't* rather than *won't* behave appropriately.

Part 3: Avoiding off-task behaviour

The best way to deal with off-task behaviour is to stop it occurring in the first place. Inevitably, the sections of this book that explore strategies are somewhat reactive – they essay what to do when off-task behaviour takes place.

However, this section goes back a step and asks you to consider what you can do to avoid having to implement these strategies at all. It opens with a discussion of classroom procedures you can employ to ensure your classroom is an orderly space for learning. It then explores what are the underlying factors that drive student engagement and what you can do to enhance and maintain this engagement.

- ◆ In **Chapter 8: Transitions and procedures** we discuss how to establish routines to set high expectations and minimise disruptions.
- ◆ In **Chapter 9: Establishing student engagement** we explore how students need lessons that offers challenge, choice and purpose.
- ◆ In **Chapter 10: Enhancing student engagement** we identify strategies for maintaining and maximising engagement by building relationships, sparking curiosity and establishing a culture of feedback.

ADAPTING THESE STRATEGIES IN YOUR SCHOOL

You should take careful note of how this approach is designed to fit within your school's established protocols around dealing with off-task behaviour: most schools have clear procedures and policies for dealing with student behaviour. These differ widely from school to school. Your school might take a restorative justice approach, have a well-established positive behaviour framework or a clear list of expectations – and consequences for when these expectations are not met. The approach we discuss here is not an alternative to these well-established policies but rather a set of strategies for realising them in the everyday.

This approach offers you subtle ways to reiterate the positive expectations behind these policy frameworks in your classroom. It explores techniques for reducing the frequency with which you have to rely on the school-level responses built into these documents for dealing with serious off-task behaviour. This focus on tactics and technique at the classroom level ensures that – regardless of what broader framework your school employs – the material covered here will have practical application with your students.

Most schools have clear procedures and policies for dealing with student behaviour.

Developing an effective approach

Of course, being an effective classroom teacher is not just about having a toolkit of strategies but also having the right approach. Those colleagues who first gave me advice on how to deal with challenging classroom behaviour did more than offer me tips; they talked about and modelled the values that effective teachers bring to every encounter with a student.

The importance of having the right mindset is something I am constantly reminded of both as an educator and a teacher coach. Teachers who take the time to affirm and connect with their students and are proactive and strategic about how they go about doing this invariably get the most out of these strategies – and indeed their classes.

Throughout the wide-ranging discussion of teaching strategies in this book, we will return again and again to the principles that inform these techniques. This is sometimes done explicitly, but perhaps just as often it is implicit in the way I suggest implementing these techniques. I have listed these principles in the following pages to ensure that they are front of mind as you evaluate the strategies in this book – and in any encounter with your students.

Focus on building relationships

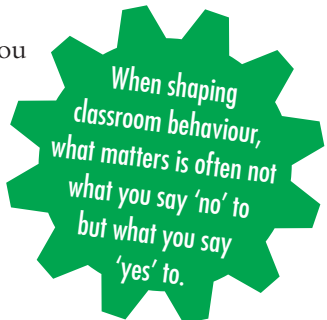
One of the golden rules of teaching is ‘relationship first, task second’. Constantly looking for opportunities to connect with students makes it more likely you will meet them at their point of need and spend less time correcting off-task behaviour – and when you do have to address this behaviour students will be more likely to take up your advice.

Teach appropriate behaviour

Make explicit how you want students to behave. Don’t presume they know what to do or get stuck insisting that they ‘should know better’. Clearly describe your expectations and take on the responsibility for teaching them as you would for any other area of the curriculum. Students are more likely to be positive and successful learners when they know precisely what positive and successful learning looks like.

Be positive

When shaping classroom behaviour, what matters is often not what you say ‘no’ to but what you say ‘yes’ to. Endorse behaviour you want to see more of and tactically ignore, pivot around and de-escalate behaviours you want to minimise. ‘Catching students behaving’ in this way creates a positive classroom culture that allows all students to do their best.



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Don't react, respond

When you encounter off-task behaviour, avoid emotional, first-impulse reactions that might escalate the situation. Instead, plan ahead. Anticipate common types of off-task behaviour and decide how you might best respond to them in a calm and considered manner. Having this bank of options then makes it easier to deal with issues quickly and confidently as they arise in the moment.

Address the behaviour – not the person

When you do have to correct a student's behaviour, make it clear that this is not personal. You are focussed on their actions, not them. This not only makes your interventions manageable in terms of scope – you are not trying to change who the student is but what they are doing – but also helps preserve your relationship. When the off-task behaviour ends, the point of contention between you disappears, and you get back to learning together.

Seek to understand

Reflect on what is driving a student's actions. Most off-task behaviour can be read as a kind of communication: what is this student's behaviour trying to tell you? Look to what happens immediately before and after an incident. If you can spot underlying patterns in a student's actions, you are much more likely to be able to help them – even if their behaviour is entrenched or particularly challenging.

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Be strategic

Treat every incident of off-task behaviour as an opportunity to refine your technique. Avoid moral judgments – don't question the student's character or your own innate abilities – just focus on how well your strategy worked on this occasion and what you will try the next time you encounter this behaviour. A strategic approach like this helps give you emotional distance and a sense of agency – even in difficult or heated situations.

These principles empower your teaching. They ensure that no matter how challenging a class is, you feel like there is always something that you can try to address off-task behaviour. These principles remind you that while you may not be able to resolve every issue or find the right strategy every time, it is you who has the biggest say in what will happen. They remind you that the person you have the most influence over in the classroom is yourself.