



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT FROM OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM

I began my teaching career in 1970, when I was hired by the Irving Independent School District. I majored in P.E. and English, and my teaching assignment was to coach sports and teach seventh-grade English. Crockett Junior High was the junior high school I had attended, and I was assigned the same classroom, room 72, where I was taught English. I had no clue that I would ever teach English. I thought all coaches taught P.E. So, with whistle in pocket and books in hand, I left the coaches' office; and after nine years away, I headed back to room 72.

Like any new teacher, I was trying to prepare myself to do a good job in the classroom and often thought about former teachers in order to gather classroom ideas. I found out quickly that when I began thinking about former teachers—even while in college—the first teachers who came to mind were those who had gone out of their way to help me and my classmates. I recalled that these same teachers were the ones who had the respect of the students and few discipline problems.

I now thought of these traits as classroom management skills and wondered, "How did these teachers make us enjoy learning about what they were teaching?" I was surprised; but the truth is, I could remember more details about my former teachers who showed an interest in me and their subjects than the teachers who had little time for my outside interests. As a new teacher, I translated this type of bonding with students as "good classroom management."

I recalled the time that Mrs. Lovelett, my fifth-grade teacher, let me take *Little House on the Prairie* home to catch up on what I missed when I was sick one day. I did not remember much else from her class, but I did remember that Boise was the capital of Idaho.

I could not help but think of the time that Mrs. Wilkinson, my senior English teacher, came to our house to help me on a research paper because I got so sunburned one weekend from driving my tractor

without a shirt on my back that I could not go to school. Because Mrs. Wilkinson went out of her way to help me, I had the desire to dive in and give her a good research paper.

I felt a lump in my throat as I thought about the time that Dr. Wright, my college sophomore literature professor, offered to give me an "incomplete" instead of an F when I was hospitalized with a detached retina the week before the fall semester final exam. I had never heard of an "I" grade; I thought I already had failed the course. She also visited with my other instructors and encouraged them to give me the same opportunity. Had they not done that, I surely would have left college. However, I do remember one more thing from her course; she had beautiful handwriting and did not cross her t's when the t came at the end of a word. Instead, she used a t with a "tail." I took Dr. Wright for another class in the spring semester, and to this day I still put tails on my word-ending t's. When I applied for a position at the college where I had taken Dr. Wright for English, she noticed the "tailed t" on my application when she, as English Department Chair, interviewed and hired me to teach English in her department.

I was convinced that the teachers who tried to help me by showing an interest in my outside life stuck in my mind as the teachers after whom I wanted to model my classroom-management style. It became apparent that showing interest in what was going on in my students' lives outside of class would make them interested in what was going on in *my life*—and *my life* was all about teaching them English.

On the first day of teaching, I learned that my students were not as interested in English as I. I did not know why, but they were not the least bit excited about phrases and clauses. Therefore, I immediately began getting involved with the disinterested students' outside activities, and this solidified my whole career. I remembered from my days in room 72 that when my teacher, Mrs. Williams, would show interest in one student's outside activities, this action made the rest of the class feel that she also was interested in their outside activities, even though they had not been approached individually.



I showed up at a surprise birthday party, held at the local skating rink, for one of my weaker students. He had a bad attitude about English and was tagged as a discipline problem. I earned little respect from the kids for my skating abilities, but I did gain respect for what the students thought I liked to do—teach English.

I have carried this “outside interest” philosophy with me throughout my teaching career, from secondary school, to corporate training, and today at the collegiate level. I really do believe that the professors who are seen at college events are the same professors who have the best retention numbers and attract students in follow-up courses, especially when teaching marginal students in first-year academic courses. Many first-semester students are looking for a bonding agent to adhere them to the college. That bonding agent could be you.

Give it a try. Pick a student who is lagging behind, and find out what he or she likes to do outside of class. Last week, I chose a basketball player who frequently was absent or showing up late for class. I went to the next “away” game and was there an hour before the game started—sitting right behind the bench—just so he would see me. (The players always know who is in the crowd.) At the beginning of the next class, I asked the student so all could hear me, “Jeremy, nice game, but I have a question. How is it that I can get to an away game an hour before the game starts, and you can’t walk over to class from the dorm and get here on time?” The rest of the class knew that I cared about all students’ outside activities, not just Jeremy and his basketball interests. Jeremy was never late again, got after the books, and transferred to a university on a full basketball scholarship. He may never teach English, but I never thought that I would either.

I bet you remember more about former instructors who tried to help you and showed interest in your interests outside the classroom, and I bet you can still hear, even today, things they said in class. And, I bet you implement in your own classes some of their classroom management skills—now that you understand them. Save a student. You never know but what he or she may be teaching in your classroom some day! What’s your room number?

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