

What's the Real Purpose of Classroom Management?

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By Alfie Kohn

Everyone knows why classroom management skills are considered a critical part of teacher training. The reason we need to minimize “misbehavior” and get students to show up, sit down, and pay attention is so we can teach them stuff. That proposition is so obvious that it's rarely defended or even spelled out, except maybe on the first day of Classroom Management 101. While we may disagree about strategies – for example, the relative merits of discipline versus *self-discipline* (getting kids to regulate and manage themselves) – we take it for granted that the whole point is to create an environment conducive to learning.

But what if that wasn't entirely true? What if, at least for some teachers and administrators, an orderly classroom was the ultimate goal? And what if the curriculum and the model of teaching were actually chosen with that goal in mind?

I first encountered this unsettling possibility some years ago in a book called *Contradictions of Control*. Its author, Rice University professor Linda McNeil, had spent a lot of time

observing in classrooms and thinking about what she saw. Rather than treating discipline as “instrumental to mastering the [academic] content,” she concluded, “many teachers reverse those ends and means. They maintain discipline by the ways they present course content.”¹

Once I let that idea sink in, I had to admit that a traditional curriculum (lists of facts to be memorized and skills to be practiced) and a traditional approach to pedagogy (lectures, textbooks, worksheets) make it much easier for a teacher to maintain control over students. Just compare that sort of classroom to one in which kids are encouraged to construct meaning and understand ideas from the inside out – an approach that’s collaborative, open-ended, project-based, and driven by students’ interests. If the first model suggests a rehearsed solo performance by the instructor, the second offers instruments to everyone in the room and invites them to participate in a kind of jazz improvisation.

If your goal were order and conformity, which would you choose?

What’s true about course content and teaching method is also true about assessment. Grades are not particularly reliable or valid indicators of intellectual proficiency, and students who are led to focus on them tend to think in a more superficial fashion, avoid challenging tasks, and lose interest in whatever they’re learning.² But the one thing grades do very effectively is make students obey. They’re a double-edged mechanism, featuring rewards for compliance and punishment for noncompliance.³

Once that mechanism is in place, the question becomes: What can be reduced most readily to a letter or number: test results or extended projects? assignments completed by individual students or by groups? a focus on facts or on complex and inventive explorations of ideas? If you test

students on factual material, it's easy (or at least easier) to make them do what they're told. By contrast, as one educator noticed, "If assessment focused on more complex and ambiguous goals, such as independent interpretation and analysis, the teachers seemed to fear that...classroom control could be undermined." Which is precisely why many of them preferred old-fashioned tests.⁴

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I'm tempted to describe this way of looking at things as a Copernican shift in understanding, but that's probably an overstatement. After all, either the earth revolves around the sun or vice versa, whereas here the situation isn't all or nothing. Academic content obviously isn't in the service of compliance in every classroom, and it's undoubtedly true of any given teacher at some times more than at others. Also, even though one *effect* of traditional instruction is to make it easier to control students, we'd still have to prove that was the primary *goal* for many educators. (Maybe it's just an accidental result of the use of worksheets and quizzes, which are favored by teachers – or required *of* teachers – for other reasons.)

Despite these qualifications, though, this inversion of the conventional wisdom helps us make sense of practices and policies that otherwise seem mystifying. And given that the demand for conformity and compliance is integral to so many aspects of school life – including elaborate systems of rewards and punishments to elicit obedience – we have to take seriously the possibility that this is indeed an end in itself.

But why? Researchers who study the effects of control versus "autonomy-support" in teaching have treated this as a puzzle. Given the evidence that overwhelmingly demonstrates the benefits of the latter,⁵ why is the former so incredibly

widespread? If control is counterproductive in so many ways, why do so many educators seem to value compliance in students above other attributes – perhaps to the point of choosing academic content in order to elicit it? A couple of scholarly articles address that question thoughtfully and at some length,⁶ but for now, I'll mention just three possible answers:

* *Pressure from administrators*: Educational researcher John Nicholls once remarked that he had met a lot of principals who “don't want to hear a buzz of excitement in classrooms – they want to hear nothing.” Evaluations of teachers are often based less on whether students are engaged and happy, or curious and caring, than on whether they're silent and orderly. There is risk involved for a teacher who challenges that expectation and creates an intellectually vibrant classroom of outspoken critical thinkers.

* *Conservative ideology*: Many teachers don't need to be pushed in this direction because they're already sympathetic to a worldview that values obedience, particularly on the part of children. A student's job is to do what he or she is told, period. It literally never occurs to some educators that kids should play a role in deciding how to allocate class time, construct a curriculum, assess their own learning, solve conflicts, decorate the walls, and arrange the furniture. A good teacher by definition is one who has firm control of the classroom – who “does to” rather than “works with” – and many parents vocally support that view.

* *Psychological needs*: Researchers have discovered that “individuals who are unsure of their own power, when placed in a position of nominal authority, are the ones who are most likely to rely on coercive control tactics.”⁷ It's not unreasonable to suppose that some of these people may actively seek out such positions. Those who feel powerless in their lives, convinced that others don't listen to them, may be drawn to a job where they can damn well *make* people listen to

them – and look at them (“I need all eyes on me right now, boys and girls”).

Regardless of its source, a strong preference for compliant students may help to explain the resistance we often find to student-centered, project-based investigations – despite the clear advantages of that approach as compared to “bunch o’ facts” instruction. It’s not just that richer forms of teaching are more challenging, or less likely to raise scores on standardized tests; it’s that they don’t lend themselves as easily to a control-based classroom that may be preferred for other reasons.

Thus, control, and the disproportionate focus on “managing” classrooms, should be understood as an issue in its own right rather than just as something intended to facilitate academic instruction. That recognition, in turn, makes it possible to consider that the ideal isn’t just less control but an affirmative promotion of students’ autonomy – a concerted commitment to support their status as deciders, active learners, and members of a democratic community.⁸

NOTES

1. Linda M. McNeil, *Contradictions of Control: School Structure and School Knowledge* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986), pp. 157-58.
2. For research in support of these claims, see Alfie Kohn, *Punished by Rewards* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993) and *The Schools Our Children Deserve* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), as well as the article “The Case Against Grades,” *Educational Leadership*, November 2011: 28-33.
3. This control strategy can be intensified by making grades more specific (for example, with the use of elaborate rubrics) or more salient (by posting them online or encouraging students to focus on what proportion of their final grades will be determined by major exams, quizzes, homework, and class participation).

4. Elizabeth A. Kahn, "A Case Study of Assessment in a Grade 10 English Course," *Journal of Educational Research* 93 (May-June 2000): 286.
5. A review of 44 studies finds that all "point to the same conclusion – namely, that students relatively benefit from autonomy support and relatively suffer from being controlled" (Johnmarshall Reeve, "Why Teachers Adopt a Controlling Motivating Style Toward Students and How They Can Become More Autonomy Supportive," *Educational Psychologist* 44 [2009]: 162). This is true across ages, across cultures, and with respect to outcomes that include academic achievement, classroom engagement, intrinsic motivation to learn, creativity, and psychological well-being.
6. Reeve, op. cit.; and Bart Soenens et al., "Psychologically Controlling Teaching: Examining Outcomes, Antecedents, and Mediators," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 104 (2012): 108-20.
7. Daphne Blunt Bugental et al., "Who's the Boss? Differential Accessibility of Dominance Ideation in Parent-Child Relationships," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 72 (1997): 1298. Another researcher adds: "When teachers enter the classroom with controlled motivation of their own and when they harbor controlling orientations within their personalities, they are more likely to adopt a controlling style toward students" (Reeve, op. cit.: 166).
8. I've written about the benefits of doing so in "How to Create Nonreaders," *English Journal*, September 2010: 16-22, drawing from the work of a constellation of researchers (including the authors of the articles mentioned in notes 5 and 6) who are associated with a branch of psychology called self-determination theory. (See www.selfdeterminationtheory.org.)

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