TOP TEN TECHNIQUES for EFFECTIVE TEACHING

by LouAnne Johnson

These ten techniques are the focus of the Effective Teaching courses I teach. The feedback from new and veteran teachers is consistent: they work!

Ready, Set, Go. The #1 tool of effective teachers is the Do Now or Get Started (master teacher/ author Fred Jones refers to this routine as Bellwork). Whatever you choose to call it, use this strategy consistently and you will see student engagement skyrocket and misbehavior plummet. From the first day of class and every day thereafter, make sure students have something useful (not busy work) to do the moment they enter your classroom. Post your instructions in the same place every day so that students can find them quickly. The options are limitless, but here are a few examples: post a few problems based on the previous day's lesson for students to solve individually or with partners; post a photo or quotation and have students respond to it in writing; distribute a letter that contains spelling and grammatical mistakes for students to correct; write a vocabulary word on the board for students to look up in the dictionary and use in a sentence; post a picture of an animal on the board and have young students find other pictures of the same animal throughout the room. The keys to success here are consistency, interesting and appropriately challenging tasks, and acknowledging the cooperation of students with sincere verbal praise.

Teach (and re-teach) Routines. Effective teachers establish routines -- either intentionally or instinctively. They consider every activity that is likely to occur with frequency and they teach students how to transition to and from that activity. Teaching students to respond, "Eyes on You" when the teacher says "One Two" is a much faster and more effective method of gaining student attention than hollering, "Quiet!" or "Please stop talking." Consider creating standard routines for entering the classroom, responding to teacher questions (raise your hand first or just speak out?), turning in homework/assignments, distributing or collecting materials and books, hushing when the PA system comes on, standing behind chairs quietly to wait for dismissal at the end of class, etc. It takes a bit of time to teach students routines but once they are learned, you will make up the time ten-fold because students will operate the way well-trained employees do. This isn't to say that we want them to be mindless robots. Just the opposite. We want them to be thinking humans.

Control Your Classroom, Not Your Students. Banish the thought that you can control students. It's a waste of everybody's time and is bound to frustrate you. But do hold firmly to the thought that you can control your classroom. Decide what kind of atmosphere you want to create, and then consider what behaviors will be required from students to make your dream classroom possible. This approach will lead you towards creating a behavior code [*Respect yourself and everybody in this room*] or a short list of Be's & Do's [*be respectful, be safe, do your best*], instead of a list of specific rules such as "No name-calling," or "No running." Those broad categories cover dozens of behaviors and you can quickly remind students of the required standards of behavior for your classroom when they stray by asking them questions: *Is that respectful? Are you truly doing your best?* This method doesn't lock you into specific rules, and doesn't require that you waste time issuing consequences and punishments, but gives you a broad base from which to guide and correct students.

Make Students Responsible for Their Behavior. If you have students who are determined to disrupt your dream classroom, remember: most misbehavior is not about you. Unless you have said or done something to offend or anger a student, don't take the student's behavior personally. There is always a reason for a student's behavior (she could be hungry, neglected or abused at home, upset over a broken friendship or romance, reacting to bullies, terrified of failing your class, and so on). And don't take responsibility for students' behavior by immediately assigning punishments and consequences. Put your disruptive students in control of their own behavior. Take them aside, one at a time, where you can have a private conversation. Give them a moment to reflect. Then, ask them to think about their behavior and offer them three choices:

You can decide to cooperate and be respectful right now and rejoin the class
You can step outside and take as long as you need to calm down before rejoining us
You can continue your current behavior which will result in disciplinary action.

The choice - and the behavior - are up to the student. This puts the responsibility where it belongs and allows students to choose to behave well, instead of having good behavior imposed upon them (which is usually short-term). And whatever students choose, the consequences will be their own fault. They can't blame the teacher for "being mean" and use that as an excuse for future bad behavior. And if a student decides to cooperate, thank him/her for making a good choice and wipe the slate clean. Don't carry a grudge. Let it go. You have far, far bigger fish to fry.

Shift Your Perspective. Shift your perspective-- from negative to positive. Instead of being on the lookout for wayward students, train yourself to ignore mild bad behavior and catch students being good. The default setting of most adults, especially teachers, is to notice the 10% of things that children are doing wrong, instead of the 90% they are doing right. With practice, you can teach yourself to focus on the positive -- and the results will surprise and delight you (and your students). Try this the next time somebody is talking out of turn: find a student who is quietly paying attention to you and say, "I see that Alex is very politely paying attention. Thank you, Alex. That's excellent." If necessary, find one or two or three more students who are behaving well and acknowledge their excellent behavior. This works equally well when students shout out answers instead of raising their hands. Instead of acknowledging your shouters by reminding them what they are doing wrong, find a few students (don't single out just one) who have their hands raised and say, "Thank you, Shamica and Julie and Malik and Jose for raising your hands. That is fantastic." And then call on one of those fantastic students. Continue this practice until both you and the students start to focus on what they are doing right instead of what they are doing wrong.

Do the Diagnostics. If your textbook doesn't have a diagnostic exam, create your own assessment. If you are about to teach multiplying fractions, for example, find out who already knows how to multiply fractions very well. Then, create a challenging alternative assignment for those little math quizzes while you teach the rest of the class. Then, put everybody in small groups and let them work together to solve some problems. This will eliminate a lot of the boredom that turns into misbehavior when students are not challenged, while still allowing you to teach those who need instruction. Do the same with every major concept or course component (literary analysis, sentence construction, roots & prefixes). If students already know more than 90% of what you plan to teach, design an assignment (or let them help you design a project) that will challenge them and help them develop their skills and knowledge.

Check the Lights. If you have any reluctant readers in your classroom, watch for signs of light sensitivity during activities that involve independent reading. Be alert for students exhibiting the following behaviors: squinting, rubbing eyes, fidgeting, rapid blinking, curving their arms around their books to create shadows over the page, watery or red eyes, complaints of headaches or stomach aches. These are common signs of light sensitivity which can make reading uncomfortable or painful. Light sensitivity is not a vision problem such as near or far-sightedness. Research shows that up to 50% of people who are labeled as learning disabled actually suffer from light sensitivity which is exacerbated by reading high contrast print (such as black words on a white page) or text printed on glossy pages (as many textbooks are), especially under

fluorescent lights (which remove some of the colors from the light spectrum). Light sensitivity can be addressed by changing the lights to full-spectrum bulbs, reading in natural daylight or, placing a transparent colored filters over the page. Find out more by visiting www.irlen.com or www.nrsi.com.

Fix the Teacher, Not the Student. It is far easier-- and much more effective-- to change the behavior of one person (You) than it is to change the behavior of ten or twenty or thirty students who are not really interested in changing. If students are not doing what you want them to do, stop and ask yourself: *What have I done (or not done) to make them think this behavior is correct or acceptable?* Do you plant yourself in front of the room and issue orders? Do you shout at students from across the room to correct them? Do you give very clear instructions, with visual aids and modeling, so students know exactly what they are expected to do and how long they have to do it? Do you loom over students in order to intimidate them? Are you prepared to begin class as soon as the starting bell rings, or are you busy shuffling paperwork? Do you make eye contact with every student so they feel individually recognized and worthy of your attention? Try making a quick list of major problems in your classroom. Then, brainstorm ways that you could change your approach to that particular issue. Here's a perfect example: at one school, gum was a huge problem. It was stuck everywhere. More rules and stricter punishments didn't solve the problem. Finally, the principal decided to try something different. He decreed that gum could be chewed -- but it had to be chewed properly. The teachers taught students how to chew gum quietly and dispose of it by wrapping it in paper and putting it in the trash. Voila! The gum problem disappeared.

Offer Sincere Praise. Think of how you feel when your supervisor acknowledges your accomplishments and efforts on the job. Students enjoy being acknowledged, too. And there are endless opportunities to appreciate students. You can thank them for walking into the room instead of running, for taking their seats quietly, for listening, for cooperating, for making an effort to learn, for writing neatly, for helping a classmate, for raising their hands, for thinking, for offering an answer (even if it isn't correct), for having another go at something difficult, for helping you collect papers, for being polite, and so on. Some teachers worry about over-doing the praise, but that isn't a real danger *if* you are honest. One school administrator told me about his recent visit to a school where a team of four teachers were working to bring underachieving students up to grade level. Three of the four teachers had serious behavior problems and declared that the students were unmanageable. The fourth teacher said the students were delightful. When he visited the classrooms, the administrator kept a tally of how many offers of praise each teacher made in relation to the number of corrections. The three teachers who had behavior problems

used a ratio of 4:1 which was the minimum they were required to use according to their team teaching plan. The fourth teacher, the one with no behavior problems, used a ratio of 24 to 1 praise to correction! Clearly, the students didn't get tired of hearing how well they were doing. "The key to success with praise," the teacher told the administrator, "is that you have to be sincere. Otherwise, it means nothing."

Celebrate Mistakes. Build mistakes into your curriculum. Along with the ever-growing focus on testing, we have the rising fear of making mistakes. As we all know, progress is impossible without error. The president of IBM once said, "If you aren't failing 50% of the time, you aren't trying enough new things." Consider major league baseball players: a 35% success rate in the batter's box is considered phenomenal. Yet when little children are successful 50% of the time, they are considered failures, F students. In order to be considered successful, students have to be successful at least 80% of the time. We'd prefer 90% plus. It's no wonder that so many teachers report students who can't come up with creative ideas, who are afraid to make mistakes, who just want the teacher to give them facts so they can write those facts down and study them for the test. Teachers must create opportunities for students to make mistakes, so they can learn from the mistakes and, if possible, follow the mistakes to some new truths. We can begin by acknowledging our own mistakes. some teachers worry that students will lost respect for them if they admit their mistakes. The opposite is true. When a teacher makes a mistake, and demonstrates how to handle making that mistake by reflecting upon it and learning from it, students not only gain respect for the teacher, they learn valuable skills for coping with their own problems, and become bolder about exploring their own talents and creativity.