

Class Wars: Initial Steps Into The Fray

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Abstract

This article explores the issue of preparing trainee teachers for the challenges of how to face their students' 'disruptive behaviour' which sometimes marks the beginning and sets the tone for the remainder of sessions. In this paper I explore my work mentoring two trainee teachers, looking at the options available to them on entering classrooms where students displayed disruptive behaviour. There is a context of Ofsted criteria, whereby disruptive behaviour is no longer acceptable and 'failure' is allocated as an observation grade where 'disruptive behaviour' occurs. This piece offers an exploration of classroom management strategies for preparing trainee teachers who face challenging situations in Further Education (FE) environments and suggests strategies for dealing with the difficulties of disruptive classes. The reason why this is vitally important is because trainee teachers in Cert Ed classes wish to discuss this issue more than any other topic. It affects their self-esteem, confidence and class interaction in delivering the curriculum.

Key words

Behaviour Management; Disruptive Behaviour; Teaching and Learning Strategies; Starting a Session.

Introduction

This article offers an exploration of a concern many trainee and qualified teachers face in the FE sector (Rushton, 2010; Mulholland, 2012; Spiers, 2011), namely that they often have to deal with disruptive classes/students. This piece explores two situations where trainee teachers had limited control over their students' behaviour, particularly in the first few minutes when they entered the classroom and how that impacted on later aspects of the lesson.

I currently work as a lecturer in Teacher Education, delivering sessions on teaching, learning and assessment, and also personal development and professionalism. I observe Cert Ed students, whilst also working as an External Verifier for the Certificate to Teach in the Lifelong Learning Sector (CTLLS) qualification. My general experience is that I have taught from pre-entry Level 1 to third year degree programmes in several geographic areas of deprivation for the last 30 years. This experience is relevant because in this context I have seen many classes where students displayed disruptive behaviour as tutor, mentor and Teacher Educator. As data collector in this paper, I am aware of myself as someone who is constantly describing, evolving, analysing and reflecting on strategies for understanding and countering classroom disruptions. I have written about this previously and feel it is still a challenging issue for many trainee and qualified teachers (Lebor, 2000).

I previously worked as a mentor to trainee teachers in a Yorkshire college. The two case studies explored here took place in this context. The wider context was that at the time, trainee teachers could still pass their teaching practice when disruptive behaviour broke out; now the parameters set by Ofsted show little tolerance for disruptive behaviour during an observation and such a lesson would be considered "inadequate" by them. In their *Framework Ofsted (2012)* say that schools are evaluated partially on the low level disruption that takes place. But what is disruptive behaviour? At its simplest, disruptive behaviour is that which is not conducive to learning (Ofsted, 2012). There is a wide

spectrum of disruptive behaviour from chattering to violence. There are differences of context. Is the disruption affecting the teacher or other students? Is it happening in class or outside (DfE, 2012)? In the two case studies, the first act was arguably against the teacher; the second was accumulated, but created constant low level interference with the progress of the session.

It could be argued that trainee teachers shouldn't be placed in settings where disruptive behaviour is prevalent, but this would merely shield trainees from the realities of teaching (Milne, 2010). In any case, trainee teachers are often already in situ, covering their required hours per year when they sign on for their Cert Ed. As a requirement to be assessed as worthy and competent of the Cert Ed qualification, trainees have to teach a number of hours. Teaching practice placements are a key element of gaining professional teaching qualification and status. Occasionally placements are changed because of problematic student behaviour, but generally many classes do have elements of behaviour that is not conducive to learning seething beneath the surface in FE and therefore a discussion of strategies for dealing with these issues is highly appropriate.

The two case studies

In my role as mentor to over a dozen teachers, my job was generally to observe teachers throughout college and assign grades to their performance; in my training role I had to support trainee teachers who were on teachers' training placements from a local university. When observing their lessons at that time, I merely had to say whether trainees had passed or failed their observation. With current trainees a grade can be attached to performance.

Case Study One

The first Case Study was when I observed Aiden's Communication Session with a second year Motor Vehicle group. He opened the classroom door and all 15 desks and chairs were immediately thrown on the floor by the students with a dramatic smashing sound. I had personally witnessed this sort of behaviour in other circumstances, but for the trainee it was a shock. The students had obviously planned this as an act of defiance or mischief. It was supposed to cause maximum drama and subversion. It was certainly disruptive behaviour in that it was not conducive to learning. But what should Aiden do?

He could have walked straight out, informed the course tutor and brought him in to read the riot act, but he decided to persevere with the situation. The Motor Vehicle teacher might have had sympathy with the students and had a negative attitude toward Communication Skills (Gleeson et al, 1980). Aiden looked in a state of disbelief; he looked at me, but I didn't respond. I moved to the back of the class, picked up a chair and settled down to write my report.

Aiden didn't have a loud voice, so he couldn't shout. He moved round the classroom with dignity, asking each student to pick up their chair, desk and work. He had regained his equanimity, spoke in a fairly firm voice and the students responded. Slowly each student picked up their chair.

He began writing the session's objectives on the whiteboard, namely that all students should be able to write a brief customer report on a selection of repairs made to a range of cars. There was a hand-out giving details of the cars, their faults and what had to be done to put the fault right.

He gave handouts to the class, but the class were not yet settled. There were still challenging remarks, such as: "*Had a crash then have we, sir?*" The word "*sir*" was notable. In the aftermath of rejection, this was good-natured bantering. Aiden didn't answer. He could have remained silent until he had the class's complete attention (Vizard, 2007: p. 19). Instead he gave instructions. There was still jokey resistance. Aiden decided to go down the non-adversarial approach as advised by Jones (2007). He started to move around the class, asking each student about how they felt. Why were they so angry? What had frustrated them?

Aiden appreciated that the best policy approach was not being shocked or almost expecting the unexpected and being non-dramatic. He knew tapping into students' feelings (Goleman, 1999) made students feel important, understood and appreciated. This was a humanising dialogue. Aiden rejected the authoritarian option. Striding around the class or clapping for attention (Petty, 2009) was not his style. The students said they had been working hard all day and other teachers had shouted at them. As they stated, they were "*there to change engines, not write things*"; that's what they'd done at school. It was now 4.30pm; the fact that Communication Skills had been timetabled so late showed it wasn't respected as a subject (Gleeson, 1980; Lebor, 2001). Students had turned on Aiden because he was the weak link; he was, after all, 'only' the student teacher. But Aiden presented the following counter-arguments: didn't they need the skills to be able to deal with customers who turned up at the garage at any hour? Wouldn't the students have to fill out report sheets? Hadn't they done this on their placements? The lesson was beginning to sound relevant.

Slowly Aiden was retrieving the situation. Reluctantly, students started to fill out sheets and commented on cars they had worked on either in college or on placement. There was now a buzz in the class and students were getting through the work. Aiden corrected spellings and helped with expression. Enthusiasm was growing. The students were engaged and on-task. By the end of the 40 minutes they had completed the required tasks. In the last five minutes, Aiden consolidated the session by asking the students what they had learnt. The answers came back "*how to fill in reports properly*" and "*they don't tell us that at placement*". Aiden repeated the question. The students seemed embarrassed. Eventually, the answer came back "*professionalism*". They couldn't just let out their frustration on whomever they liked. There were standards of behaviour. Just as in the garage they had to fit in with work culture, so in college it was the same.

Case Study Two

The second case study occurred at the beginning of a session where Baiden was supposed to teach Curriculum Vitae (CV) to a Level 1 Foundation Studies group. I was the mentor observer. Baiden opened the door and we were greeted with a scene where students were socialising or on their mobiles. The ambience was a mixture of boredom, antagonism and a generally un-cooperative atmosphere. Should Baiden remain silent until there was some order as Vizard (2007) advised? Should he shout? How should he draw attention to the fact that he was in the room and the lesson had started? He tried Petty's three claps (Petty, 2009). Someone mimicked him, but he was essentially ignored.

I sat at the back. Baiden turned on his PowerPoint. There were aims and objectives. He had a lesson plan, scheme of work and up-to-date resources all in place (Dixon et al, 2010). Everything he had been told to do during his training course was well prepared. The topic was CVs. He gave instructions. But the class wasn't listening.

The following narrative reflects the beginning of the session:

"Today, we are looking at CVs." The letters CV were flashed across class consciousness via PowerPoint, but the class were less than engaged. "What are CVs?" said one student, at least showing some interest. "Curriculum Vitae, it's the Latin for the history of your life!" Baiden replied. "Why do we have to learn Latin?" "You don't!" "You don't want to know the history of my life, mate!" shouted another. "Why not?" Baiden asked, PowerPoint still posed, most the class still indifferent. "Borstal mate!! Time inside!" "CVs are boring!" said another "We've done loads of them at school. We're sick of them and we're not doing them!! Do you get it?"

A small minority of students were engaged with the lesson, but there was mostly resistance or indifference. This time it was not a physical reaction to the teacher, but more obstructing the intellectual progress of the session. It could be argued that some of the students' comments were exploratory or even helpful, for example, questioning the task, the old-fashioned language, personalising the task to themselves and exposing the fact they had been taught this before. The students' criticality and resistance could be seen as positive engagement or at least an indication that some socialisation and learning were taking place, but there was a major problem in the fact that the majority of students were just not interested. Was this lack of inclusion of all students in the task merely a problematic start, from which student engagement could develop?

The narrative continued as follows:

Baiden was rattled. "Listen!" he shouted. But they didn't. He began walking around the class giving out handouts. "What's all this?" said a student, disturbed from socialising. "It's work," replied Baiden. "We can't do work!" "Why not?" asked Baiden "It's not cool!" "Is it cool to be powerless?" No-one answered this challenge. "We don't understand this!" moaned someone. Baiden had simplified versions of the CV with a basic task that everyone could do. So the work had been done before, but was also too difficult.

"Can't you fill out this form? It's just your name and address," Baiden asked. "Yeah, man! Just stop hassling us, can't you?"

Again, slowly students started to come on board. In a reluctant, un-cooperative way most students began to fill in the form and progress to the second task which was looking at model CVs which students were asked to criticise and say how their 'life stories' were different. They began constructing their own versions. Some students slumped; others carried out the set tasks. When the hour was finished, a student said "Good that's over, I can get on with my life", as if "life" and education were entirely separate. It was ironic that they had been studying curriculum vitae.

Baiden turned off the PowerPoint, collected papers from the students, said thank you and left. Sadly, no-one acknowledged he had gone. It was almost as if the lesson had not taken place. Baiden's lesson did not involve quite as stark a rejection as the first scenario, but nevertheless it was problematic in that all students were not engaged with the tasks. It was not clear that this session had been conducive to any learning.

Analysis

Although under the present Ofsted regime, both lessons might well be considered 'Unsatisfactory' by Ofsted because they contained substantial disruption to learning, at the

time of these observations, Aiden's lesson was considered a pass, whilst Baiden's was referred. The question for Teacher Educators is what advice could be given to trainees on how to deal with these challenging circumstances?

It should be said that both Case Studies suffered from the problems identified in Willis (2005/1977) that young, working class males identify with a counter-culture in opposition to the values, curriculum and attitudes of middle-class teachers. However, both classes consisted of male and female students from a range of social and ethnic backgrounds, so there was no simple correlation between specific groups and disruption. Some Motor Vehicle students' parents were garage owners and Foundation students' parents owned shops or properties. There was a culture clash between the students and the teacher, but not necessarily one based on class. Nevertheless, Aiden was able to help students realise that there was some relevance in doing Communication Skills. Baiden didn't really manage to make this breakthrough.

In the post-mortem, Aiden said he felt like walking out and refusing to teach this group because the 'crash' was so disturbing. Then he realised that connecting up with these students was the solution. As a trainee teacher, he was in a difficult situation in that if he admitted to failure, there might not be a way back. He might not be allowed to replace this group with another on his timetable. This would compromise the number of hours he would accumulate in order to fulfil required time as a trainee. He would also be admitting his vulnerability and lack of control over students. Would this show he couldn't stand up for himself, couldn't be trusted or wasn't fit to be a teacher? The questions might start to creep in as to whether he was suitable for the job. Should he pass (Lambert-Heggs, 2011)? Would he be employed by the college if he refused to engage with this class?

Aiden realised that he had to show the students why the lesson was relevant for their practical lives on placement and future careers. This seemed to be the breakthrough. The problem for Baiden was that he didn't make the argument that CVs were important for his students.

There can be an underlying feeling on vocational courses that students are being prepared for careers in areas where there is little possibility of employment (Simmons and Thompson, 2011). This can engender a deep sense of cynicism, despair and disruption in class. What is the point of learning about CVs if there are no jobs or the jobs available might not even need CVs (Willis, 1977)? Explaining the relationship between teacher and students in terms of the increasing commodification of education or analysing the economics that underpin the power structure between managers, teachers and students helps to understand the context of this relationship (Marx, 1846; Brown, 2003; Simmons, 2009; Avis, 2009). But the trainee teacher needs more help with the practicalities of gaining control or creating locally negotiated learning space for their students (Kyriacou, 1998; Gleeson et al, 1980). It could be argued that CVs are a vital part of the employability curriculum, but if so, how could Baiden have started the session in a more effective way?

In his practical guide, Petty does talk about '*Creating a working atmosphere in the classroom*' (2009: p. 102). He suggests setting up everything before students arrive; Vizard suggests pre-arranging the classroom geography so it could be set out like a horse-shoe, more geared towards facilitating an adult discussion than the serried lines of pedagogic class control (2007: p. 20). However, the assumption here is that the teacher could be in the room before the students. Both trainee teachers arrived in classes that were already in position. Petty says that:

'The first five minutes of any lesson are crucial in setting the atmosphere for the rest of the lesson...If a class is particularly noisy, try making the first activity one where the students are working alone, without needing input from you'

(2009: p. 106)

Baiden gave instructions for students to work, but they didn't. As Willis (2003/1977) says, instructions are the voice and ideology of the institution; humour and subversion are the counter-culture of resistance. So how could Baiden have engaged with this class? Petty (2009) suggests:

'Get silence first and make sure the class are all looking at you. Some teachers, especially those who must compete with noise from machines, have a routine way of attracting attention, such as clapping three times. Be brief, clear and positive'

(p. 106)

Baiden tried clapping, but it didn't work.

Marzano et al suggest setting down rules and clear procedures early in the session:

'Before addressing specific rules and procedures with students, it is useful to have a discussion regarding the fact that many situations in real life involve rules and procedures'

(2003: p. 26)

This is backed by Hannah (2012) who discusses establishing clear rules and choices.

Setting ground rules is often a key element in the opening discourse of Teacher Education. Neither trainee did this. However, these tactics assume that there is at least a dialogue between tutor and students. Wong (2009) counters an authoritarian, disciplinary model with a managerial one where negotiation with students is central. Aiden seemed to go down this route, negotiating with students, humanising them, seeing it from their point of view. The challenge to his 'authority' was more extreme, but his ability to regroup and create connection with individuals seemed more effective.

Theories of classroom management tend to suggest making a strong first impression through posture, power and greeting position (Vizard, 2007: pp. 18-19). Again, in the classic text, Petty's *Teaching Today* advises trainees to:

'Stride about the room as if you are absolutely confident of your ability to control the group. Appear to be self-confident, relaxed and in control – especially when you are not. This is particularly important in your first few lessons or when you are coping with difficulty'

(2009: p. 99)

More recently a list of strategies in *The Guardian* included the advice of smiling and greeting classes, especially the ones you most dread (Hannah, 2012).

Baiden's smile was more of a grimace.

Theorists, such as Kounin (1977), offer a preventative approach, thus setting up more positive expectations in the culture of lessons. It would be difficult to know how Aiden could have prevented the crash of furniture. Brophy (2004) suggests strategies for making learning meaningful, supplying extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. This was possibly a direction Baiden could have taken, asking about jobs students wanted. However,

questions about jobs are loaded where none exist, so another approach might have focused on activities students enjoyed, an audit of their skills, or where they saw themselves in the future. Students might have given subversive, humorous or pessimistic responses, but at least there would be dialogue, connection and hopefully learning.

An approach he might have used was to harness the technology that the students were using anyway and make use of Mitra's self-organising system, *The Hole In The Wall* experiment (2010). Mitra offered computer-based, self-directed learning to children in a Delhi slum, thus setting up a self-motivating learning system for children without conflict with teachers. The children are extremely poor, curious, learn a great deal, and become highly motivated. It seems to show that disruption is nothing to do with poverty. Mitra's perspective is inspiring. However, it assumes that there are computers for at least a third of the group to share, which there weren't in either trainees' classroom. His approach is geared towards primary school children. Engaging disaffected adolescents and countering their culture of negativity might involve a different narrative. If Baiden had asked the students to look up CVs on their phones, this might have been frowned on by Ofsted and have given them further licence to continue on Facebook.

According to Dreikurs et al (2005), teachers should move toward more democratisation, classroom discussion or a student-centred approach; this reflects a shift away from previous eras where the power was teacher-led reflecting the authoritarian, rigid structures of a more conformist, class-ridden society. The assumption here is again that there is enough of a relationship between teachers and students for adult learning to take place (Knowles, 1975). It was difficult for Baiden to occupy that mid-ground between authority and friendliness. It posed an almost existential question about the teacher's beingness in the classroom. Dreikurs' view is that there are logical consequences to misbehaviour. This control ideology has been rejected by Kohn's more radical *Beyond Discipline* (2006), whilst more self-directed or progressive approaches (Avis, 1999) could or should emerge. However, if Baiden had been more 'progressive' and allowed the students self-direction, then possibly no work would have been achieved at all. The hour might have been spent socialising, texting and phoning. His problem was that he couldn't exude authority. It wasn't in his personality. He needed to develop more 'presence'. But how?

In the discussion after the observations all the above issues were discussed. What did the trainees want? Apart from military support, they said they wanted a wide-ranging exploration of options, feelings and attitudes about these fraught situations. Both trainees had got their students to carry out most set tasks. The reason Baiden was 'referred' was because he had not sufficiently got his students to understand the meaningfulness of the task, its completion and therefore not all students had met their learning objectives. Aiden's solution of connecting with individuals, asking them about their feelings, ultimately humanising the students by taking their concerns seriously, seemed to offer a powerful message.

What strategies could both trainees use in the future? They might have set ground rules from their first session, set tasks immediately on arrival, explained the relevance of the tasks, made connections with individuals and developed some inexplicable quality in themselves called 'presence'. If they wanted to deliver the 'perfect' lesson, then they could read Beere's *The Perfect Ofsted Lesson* (2012). However, this would assume that there was a perfect class of students waiting for them, which, as suggested, is not always the case.

Nevertheless, by having a discussion with Baiden about these strategies for class management and suggesting he connected with the students was crucial and helped his personal development. He subsequently was able to re-enter that classroom and successfully engage with the whole group, explaining why CVs might just be useful for their futures. He also got them to produce some excellent examples.

Conclusion

The problems faced by trainee teachers often go beyond what is said in textbooks about discipline, class management and lesson preparation. There are strong institutional and Ofsted pressures to achieve in an environment that can be violent, fraught and challenging. Humanising and making connections with students in a potentially inhuman context could be a direction for helping students feel appreciated as individuals. The students' concerns and feelings are critical. Trainees might find it useful to set ground rules, tasks, explain their relevance and ask students for their response, attitudes and barriers to learning. Teacher 'presence' in class comes through experience and confidence in carrying out the above. When Aiden began to connect with his students and explore their feelings and personal reactions, their attitudes changed and they became far more co-operative and motivated.

Further exploration of discussions on trainee experiences and strategies for facing challenging classes should be a central concern of the Teacher Education curriculum. Trainees have a great need to discuss these issues so that they can learn from their own and others' experiences, build up self-esteem, confidence and class management skills to deliver the curriculum under challenging circumstances.

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