

GROWING GOOD PEOPLE

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Abstract: *As far back as 1913, when John Dewey wrote his treatise entitled “Interest and Effort in Music Education” educators were concerned about how best to “make school life vital to youth.” And more than anecdotal evidence suggests that today’s classrooms are in similar trouble. Children do not arrive ready to be taught. Teachers are at a loss as to how to best reach their students. This article explores the classroom management challenges teachers face, and provides a philosophical foundation on which to build a community of learners. The author maintains that a classroom must first be a predictable, intentionally created environment where students sense they are part of a community of learners where they are safe to take the necessary personal risks to learn.*

Key words: *John Dewey, classroom management, classroom environment, rules, discipline, reflection, intentional teaching, community, facilitator, mediation.*

“The major difficulty with our schools is that they have not adequately enlisted the interests and energies of children in school work. Good teaching, the teaching of the future, will make school life vital to youth. In so doing it will not lose sight of the demands and needs of adult society; it will serve them better in that it will have a fuller cooperation of the children” (Dewey, vii).

As far back as 1913, the unnamed editor of John Dewey’s treatise entitled “Interest and Effort in Education” made this critical point. But how can it be that we are still facing the same issues? Perhaps what is needed is a change in perspective, rather than changes of action. I am a college music education professor in my 28th year of teaching. Recently I had a long chat

with a former college student of mine. After his third year of teaching instrumental music, Brad (not his real name) was released from his position due to budget cuts and replaced by a non-certified substitute. So off he went to find another job in music education. He knew the one he found would be challenging (that’s putting it kindly and mildly) but he took it. And Brad is working hard to make it work, though the cards have been stacked against him from the beginning.

When new teachers get a position, they are eager to practice their discipline, not expecting that the classroom environment could possibly inhibit them from doing so. I am a high school music teacher. I am a band director. I am a middle school music teacher. C’mon, where are the kids who

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want to learn? The truth is, there is a first step that many teachers overlook as they work to create an effective music classroom. First and foremost, one must build the learning community. There can be no teaching in the discipline if the students are not ready to receive. But there can be teaching; the teacher must first work to grow good people and create the environment where learning can take place. I believe this means that teachers must first create an environment where children are safe to take learning risks, to think creatively, to be respected for their human-ness and their unique gifts and talents, their sense of humor, and their potential to be sensitive toward others.

From talking to Brad, it sounds as if my scenario is so very far from his reality, not only in his classroom, but in the entire school where he teaches. He spoke of unsupportive administration, teachers working in a vacuum with no professional connection to their fellow teachers, let alone a personal connection, and kids who seemingly don't care. The adults don't have the community. Do the teachers even recognize that their community might be suffering in similar ways?

So we come back to Brad's classroom challenges. Brad tells me the high school students who are in his "music appreciation" class did not elect the class; they were "dumped" there. (For an entire school year, no less.) The kids are rowdy, noisy, and disrespectful of each other. Verbal sparring and fights occur frequently. In this school, is not uncommon for a teacher to be threatened and for the administration to provide a meaningless consequence for the student's inappropriate behavior.

How do you teach anything in this environment? I believe if the environment isn't conducive to learning, then teaching and learning about music will be the first to fall prey to the unstable environment. To

be successful, teachers need to allow teaching music to be the vehicle through which they work first and foremost to *grow good people*. One must understand that if the environment isn't conducive to learning you will be wasting your time trying to teach music. Visualize the environment you want. What do you want to see when you walk into your classroom? What do you want your students' experiences to be? What kind of an atmosphere do you need to meet your goals and objectives, and make your day, dare I say, enjoyable? Seek to understand what is at the root of your students' behaviors. Why do they do what they do? What are their needs at their particular stage in development? Finally, when you've imagined what your classroom can be, you must work *intentionally* to build the community to fulfill your vision.

Many teachers make a very common mistake; they expect the students to be ready to learn when they walk into their classrooms. If students don't come to your class as "good people," when and where will they learn them? As teachers we first owe it to our students to help them to grow to be good people.

I had two "rules" in my public school music classroom.

1. Never get in the way of another student's opportunity to learn.
2. Never get in the way of the teacher's ability to teach.

My rules set the foundation for the underlying expectations I had for my students. Achieving those expectations would support the environment that I envisioned and wanted to build. *We will treat each other with respect and kindness. We will be polite in our interactions. If you can't say something in a respectful way, don't say it.* These are just a few.

One problem I have often observed is teachers not allowing kids to do SIMPLE things. We make them raise their hand to

sharpen a pencil for heaven's sake! I understand why, but go back to the root and rethink this "rule." Engage the students in some questions about what an adult would do if... they didn't have a pencil, or they needed a tissue.... Or have a conversation with your students about what they would like their learning environment to be, and how to achieve it. Students would tell you they would ask a friend to borrow pencil, pick one up from the pencil box at the front of the room, or go to the tissue box to get what they need. And I would add, with a laugh "as long as you don't whack people on the back of the head on your way up the aisle to get what you need!" Create the community. Provide them with appropriate opportunities to engage in adult behavior and to develop self-respect and recognition that they can be adults in their interactions. If we don't do that developmentally over time, who knows what kind of people we will graduate from our schools?

My ultimate goal has always been to create a community of learners who feel safe in my classroom, and who are willing to take learning risks, knowing that they will be accepted and respected for their attempts, and who treat one another with kindness and civility. As the teacher I am the *facilitator* of this community, intentionally intervening with and redirecting behaviors. I am the *mediator* who helps students to work out their conflicts, or at least to bring them to a point where they can agree to disagree so that they can move forward. I am the *parent figure* who shows the students that they can be accepted for who they are, even if they need to change their behavior. I am the *adult* who helps the students to see that they can be successful, if they stop and think long enough to make better decisions. I am the *adult* who models what civility and respect look like. I am the *teacher* who will give a student the chance

to save face and make a better decision. All of this comes as an outgrowth of my vision and intention for my classroom.

So where do the academics of teaching music come in? Teaching music is what you "do" while you work to grow good people. Without good people in your classroom, music teaching and learning can't and won't happen, or at least not to acceptable standards. Just as crops cannot flourish in soil that is not rich and ready for growth, our students also need an environment that is rich, responsive, and conducive to learning. The intentional teacher will first create the environment, and the children will flourish. It reminds me of a line in the movie "The Field of Dreams" starring Kevin Costner: "If you build it, they will come." Kevin did, they did. If you do, they will.

I admire my former college student Brad. It's easy to lay the blame solely on the students in situations like this and look for a way out of the situation. I admire Brad for having standards. I admire Brad for his patience. I admire Brad for his intention. He's going to make it, and though the next 120 school days will be challenging, his students will begin to grow into good people because they will know, at least in his classroom, there is a community where people treat each other with respect, kindness, and civility. Maybe Brad's music appreciation class will be the only place and time in a particular student's week where the student has this experience. Brad will be changing the culture of that school one minute, one student, and one class at a time.

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