

Proactive Classroom Management: Key Principles for Enhanced Learning

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore classroom management (CM) practices at a higher education institution in Oman. The study deployed observation to gather data from a sample which comprised 7 teachers to identify misbehavior learners display in classrooms and approaches teachers adopt to manage such misbehavior. The results of the study indicated that misbehavior included, but not limited to, the misuse of technology and native language among learners. Further, in most situations, direct conversations were used to deal with misbehavior. Based on the findings, some recommendations were given to enhance the quality of the teaching- learning process.

Keywords: misbehavior; classroom management; reactive; proactive; students; teachers

1. Introduction

Education is viewed as a multi-tasking profession that involves not only teaching knowledge but also instilling the codes of conduct and ethical values in learners (Thi & Nguyen, 2021). Hence, teachers as “the nucleus of all formal learning” are under mounting pressure concerning effectively carrying out both tasks (Chamundeswari, 2013). Classroom management is a crucial component that makes a successful teacher irrespective of subject content knowledge (Rubio, 2009). Classroom management is universally viewed as an essential dimension of teachers’ work; as reflected in research, it is placed among the most required teaching skills (Egeberg et al., 2021; Huntly, 2008; Jones, 2006; McKenzie et al., 2011). Henley (2010) identifies classroom management as the essential teaching skill, and notes that effective teachers create learning environments in which students’ misbehaviors and interruptions are minimized, and students’ intellectual and emotional growth is allowed. It is an approach to managing classroom behavior that stresses the strategic use of high levels of academic involvement as being incompatible with inappropriate classroom behaviors (Cook et al., 2018).

Classroom management has a profound impact on the teaching-learning process. Problematic behavior in a classroom increases the stress levels for the teacher and students alike, and disrupts the flow of lessons (Parsonson, 2012). Hepburn & Beamish (2020) note that effective classroom management results in minimal behavioral disruptions and improves academic engagement of students; however, the use of punishment has proved ineffective in minimizing the occurrence of classroom misbehavior. Further, ineffective classroom management practices have a negative impact on student learning outcomes, teacher-student relationships, and on teachers with the likelihood to suffer stress and burn out. Furthermore, punitive discipline may damage teacher-student relationships, lead to loss of instructional time, and perpetuate inappropriate behavior (Cook et al., 2018).

2. CM styles/ approaches

Clunies-Ross et al., (2008) state that from a behavioral perspective, the management procedures required to minimize student misbehaviors fall into two main categories: reactive strategies and proactive strategies. Table 1 presents the key features of the two approaches to classroom management.

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Table 1: main characteristics of CM approaches

Reactive classroom management	Proactive classroom management
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - remedial in nature - negative reactions to misbehavior - involves punitive interactions - reprimands and sanctions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Preventive in nature - adopts positive strategies - Setting expectations; positive relationships; mutual respect; praising appropriate behaviour - Students participate in behavior management

Reactive behavior management encompasses reactions which may involve punitive interactions such as public reprimands that embarrass students (Cook et al., 2018). According to Clunies-Ross et al., (2008), reactive strategies are teacher behaviors which occur in response to students' inappropriate behavior (e.g. providing an inappropriate consequence). Reprimands and sanctions are two common strategies which teachers use as a response to students' misbehaviors. Reactive discipline strategies are mainly remedial in nature. Teachers adopting reactive strategies tend to react negatively to students' inappropriate misbehaviors. Historically, classroom management has relied more on reactive rather than proactive strategies. Given the ineffectiveness of reactive behavior management, teachers are required to employ proactive classroom management (PCM) practices (Cook et al., 2018).

On the other hand, Clunies-Ross et al., (2008) argue that proactive strategies are behaviours that teachers can employ to reduce the likelihood of learners' misbehaviour and involve the alteration of a situation before it worsens (e.g., establishing rules and praising appropriate behaviour). Proactive discipline strategies stress on prevention and use a positive approach to classroom management. Teachers tend to use positive reactions to student appropriate behaviours. The literature strongly suggests that classroom behaviour management is considered to be most effective when proactive approaches are used. The use of proactive classroom management increases student on-task behaviour and lessens teacher stress. Teachers should teach and model classroom behaviour by setting rules of acceptable behaviour (expectations).

2.1 Key Principles of PCM

Cook et al., (2018) state that three key features distinguish PCM from other classroom management approaches:

1. It is a preventive approach which aims at enhancing academic engagement and thus minimise problematic behaviour that hinders learning.
2. It integrates teaching with classroom management strategies into a unified classroom system.
3. There is an emphasis on the use of strategies targeting the classroom as a whole rather than focusing on individual learners.

Proactive classroom management rests upon some key principles which distinguish it from reactive classroom management. Such principles include setting behaviour expectations, establishing positive learning environments, and involving learners in behaviour management.

2.1.1 Expectations:

Hepburn & Beamish (2020) contend that effective classroom management is mainly proactive, with an emphasis on the prevention of inappropriate behaviour by intentionally using strategies like clearly establishing behavioural expectations and acknowledging appropriate behaviour. Classroom environment consists of routines and the physical arrangement, but learning dynamics are also shaped by teacher-student relationships. The establishment of routines forms the basis for teachers to classroom management. It is significant to be consistent, especially in setting expectations and following through with consequences. Follow-up procedures can be time-consuming; nonetheless, they are necessary to prevent the persistence of misbehaviour among students (Hepburn & Beamish, 2020).

2.1.2 Positive learning environments:

Parsonson (2012) observes that the usual response to inappropriate behavior is to identify the student(s) involved as 'the problem', to see them mainly as a source of 'trouble' and to employ strategies to tackle their behavior issues. However, a classroom is an environment with its own ecology, including teacher, students and their interrelationships, the physical environment, study materials and a variety of activities which all interact to impact the behavior of the room's inhabitants. He states that in order to ensure effective teaching and classrooms that function positively with minimal levels of inappropriate behavior, planning and consistency are key requirements. Proactive behaviour management strategies create positive teacher-student relationships and thus a positive learning environment (Nagroet

al., 2019). Hepburn & Beamish (2020) note that classroom management is underpinned by mutual respect and establishing positive relationships with students (e.g., getting to know student names quickly and greeting students as strategies for rapport building with students). This leads to creating a positive learning environment, which in turn enhances student academic engagement. Positive reinforcement is crucial to inspire and sustain appropriate student behavior and learning (Kern & Clemens, 2007).

2.1.3 Involvement in behavior management

Chandra (2015) asserts that meaningful learning entails learners are provided with choice, respected, and involved in constructing their own learning. Thus, students participate in positive behaviour management; the long-term objective of any classroom management program is self-management (Chandra, 2015). Establishing and maintaining order should not be achieved by threats or intimidation but through ensuring students take responsibility for their learning and behaviour (Egeberg & McConney, 2018)

3. Classroom practices for effective teaching

In a literature review, Kern & Clemens (2007) identified the following classroom management factors which have been found to contribute to effective teaching.

- Clear, simple rules and expectations which are fairly and consistently used
- Predictable classroom tasks and activities through establishing routines, instructions, signals, and cues about forthcoming transitions, as well as for content and duration of activities
- frequent use of reinforcement, both verbal and non-verbal: Teacher praise has proved effects on both learners acquiring it and those nearby. It is recommended that verbal praise is specific and descriptive.
- As problematic behavior is often linked with learning deficits; therefore, task difficulty should be monitored. All learners should have the required entry skills and potential to be able to successfully participate in learning. Engagement and learning are possible when effective access to the curriculum and inspiration to sustain activity are ensured.
- Opportunities to be engaged in the classroom activities and to use the resources must be inclusive of all learners in the classroom.
- strategies to augment the involvement of all learners include having every student write responses to some teacher questions instead of merely seeking one correct answer.
- Effective instructions should be done systematically by getting the students' attention, and then presenting clear, specific, direct instructions one at a time as "do's", in a firm (not angry) voice, providing time to conform and reinforce for compliance.
- Sequencing of activities, so that brief and simple tasks are interweaved with longer and more challenging ones, increases involvement and learning, and consequently minimizes disruptive behavior. Preceding demanding tasks with a few simple ones supports transition to a new task. Further, carrying out active learning after breaks and then moving on to more passive activities enables students to have ample time to adapt to quieter routines.
- Pace of instruction is effective when it is lively and quick. This may be accomplished by either increasing the pace of instruction or minimizing the pauses between learner response and the presentation of the following activity. Increased pace should be managed in a way so that learners are provided with opportunities to respond and receive reinforcement.
- Choice of preferred learning activities enhances involvement and minimizes disruptive behavior. Using learners' interests as the basis for activities can maximize involvement.

4. Research questions

What inappropriate behavior do students display in classrooms?

How do teachers deal with misbehavior in classrooms?

5. Methodology

As this study seeks to explore the types of inappropriate behavior students show and how teachers deal with misbehavior in classrooms, I used the method of observation. Classroom observation is defined as the act of intentionally and systematically observing and noting what is happening in the classroom (Weade & Evertson, 1991). The key advantage of observation is that it allows researchers to collect direct data about what people do or how they behave rather than relying mainly on what they say they do (Dörnyei, 2007). Observation can provide a clear and insightful account of interactions and behavior that could not be understood through verbal accounts (Ritchie et al., 2014).

Since it is commonly used in educational research, the literature identifies a variety of observation methods (Creswell, 2012; Johnson & Christensen, 2019; Menter et al., 2011; Verma & Mallick, 1999; Wragg, 2012). Semi-structured observations were deployed as the primary research tool. This offered the opportunity to gain insight into the natural classroom contexts. It provided direct data about learners' interactions and behavior in class. It also provided insight into the overall atmosphere of the classroom.

Concerning my role as a researcher, I adopted a non-participant observation role where I visited the classrooms and took notes without being involved in the actions of the participants (Creswell, 2012). Such a role serves the study's interest in observing and documenting the natural behavior occurring in the classrooms. A total of 7 class observations were conducted, resulting in 14 hours of observational time.

6. Sample of the study

The research sample was made up of 7 lecturers and 181 students at a university in the Sultanate of Oman. The lecturers were both male and female lecturers from different countries. Most of them held master's degrees, with teaching experience ranging from 2 years to more than 25 years. As for students, they were male and female Omani students studying at different levels (freshmen and Diploma students). It is worth mentioning that the students were studying in English. Observations sought to explore teachers' responses to the types of misbehavior students show and strategies employed to deal with such misbehavior. The data was chosen carefully so that the research questions would be answered.

7. Analysis

Data was analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is the most popular analysis method in qualitative research (Walter, 2013). Thematic analysis is mainly about searching for major ideas (Creswell, 2012; Walter, 2013). Therefore, this study employed a thematic analysis by identifying the key themes in the data collected from the observations. Using observation notes, recurring patterns regarding teachers' use of classroom management strategies and student behavior were identified. Codes were generated based on specific behaviors observed, including rule adherence, disruptive behavior, engagement, and collaboration, and grouped into themes which were used as the categories for analysis. The data revealed some key themes such as effective engagement techniques, relationship building, and impact of clear expectations.

8. Findings and discussion

Question 1: What inappropriate behavior do students show in classrooms?

The first research question investigated the misbehavior teachers experience while teaching. Table 2 presents the misbehavior that students show in classrooms.

Misbehavior in classrooms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coming late to class • Using Arabic in group discussions and participation • Using smart phones during classes
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Table 2: misbehavior in classrooms

It was found that the main types of misbehavior learners do include not being punctual to classes, frequently using the first language throughout the class, and using smart phones. All the above-mentioned misbehavior led to disruption of classes and affected teaching and learning negatively. For example, it was observed that late comers tend to disturb the whole class by stepping into the classroom and greeting the class out loud. Frequently resorting to

learners' native language does not enhance their language competence. Further, students' use of smart phones during classes hinders on-task behavior.

Question 2: How do teachers deal with misbehavior in classrooms?

The second research question explored the strategies teachers use to manage misbehavior. Data revealed that teachers used a variety of strategies to manage their classrooms. Table 3 indicates the approaches teachers employ to manage inappropriate behavior.

Table 3: CM approaches used by teachers

Classroom management strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A tendency to be lenient with late comers • Requesting students to speak in English, yet misbehavior persists • Positive reinforcement
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It was indicated that the majority of teachers adopted reactive strategies to manage their classrooms. Such strategies included having direct conversations with the misbehaving students to adjust the misbehavior; however, the misbehavior persists. On the other hand, few teachers used proactive classroom management approaches to manage their classes. In such cases, it was evident that rapport was established with students, and thus appropriate behavior was the norm. Observations showed that classrooms with positive reinforcement have higher student engagement and fewer disruptions.

9. Recommendations

The findings could inform teacher training programs; proactive classroom management should be included in teacher preparation programs due to its importance in the teaching-learning process. This paper may contribute to knowledge by recommending that curricula should be planned, designed, and delivered considering proactive classroom management principles through learners' engagement activities. Further, classroom management should be addressed in continuing professional development (CPD) of teachers. To enhance deeper exploration of the topic, further research is required on areas such as the impact of specific proactive strategies on different student populations.

10. Conclusion

This article set out to explore classroom management practices at a higher education institution. Forging positive relationships with all learners is considered to be the first and most important strategy for teachers to use, followed by effective pedagogy, establishing simple and clear classroom expectations, and paying positive attention to appropriate learner behaviors. Teachers should create positive classroom environments and enhance learner engagement through access to effective learning opportunities. Consequently, teachers can reduce their stress levels and increase the enjoyment of teaching and learners' pleasure in their learning experiences. Given the significance of classroom management in enhancing the quality of learning, it is imperative that proactive classroom management is included in teacher education through teacher preparation programs.

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