



How A Simple List Can Improve Behavior

By Michael Linsin

This week I'd like to share with you a very simple strategy.

It's something you can do every day.

It takes less than a minute.

But it can improve any area of classroom management your students are struggling with.

On the surface, the strategy appears almost too simple.

But it works exceptionally well.

It has a way of creating within each student the desire to perform better and be more responsible than the day before.

The way it works is that you're going to create a short daily list of anything you're unsatisfied with.

For example, let's say you give your students the signal to begin group work and it doesn't go well. They take their time gathering up their materials. They talk and loaf around. It takes them several minutes to begin working.

If you're a regular reader of SCM, then you know that at this point we recommend sending your students back to their seats to perform the routine again.

This is good teaching. It holds them accountable. It settles them down and reminds them of their responsibilities.

However, not doing it right the first time shows a lack of independence. It suggests that your class is still unpredictable and not yet where you wish them to be.

Done right, redoing the routine sends a strong message. This alone will improve their performance over time and make them more predictable.

But there is one thing you can do fast track your results.

As soon as your students are back and working in groups the way they were taught, you're going to jot down on a sticky note or half sheet of paper a reminder to yourself that they had trouble with this one particular activity.

A short phrase like "getting into groups" is sufficient. Stuff this in your pocket and forget about it for now. Continue on with your day teaching good lessons, following through, fulfilling your promises.

When the day ends, put your list – which may now include other areas needing improvement – somewhere safe and where you won't lose it, perhaps on your desk or lesson plan book.

The next day, as part of your morning routine, pull out your list to share with your class.

Now, it's important to point out that you're not doing this as a means of reprimanding your students or airing your grievances. It isn't a list of lecture points. It isn't a rehashing of bad moments or an opportunity to show your disappointment.

The strategy has a positive purpose only and must be conveyed that way.

To start, you may want to express how much fun you had with them the day before or how impressed you were with their effort. Beginning with something positive sets the right tone. Just be honest.

Then matter-of-factly tell them what areas you want to see improved that day. Keep it no more than three items and be brief.

That's it. That's the strategy. I know, it seems too simple. It seems like just reading off a wrinkled list couldn't possibly have an effect.

But this 30-45 second strategy has a way of focusing students on their future performance. It makes them more mindful of what is expected the next time the same moment comes up – and without feeling as if you're nagging, pressuring, or forcing it upon them.

Because it's read off an impersonal list – like it's something you're all working on together – they respect it. They listen to it, agree with it, and make a mental note not to make the same mistake again.

As a result, they rarely do.

Just mentioning what you want improved, based on what you held them accountable for the day before, causes them to be more cognizant the next time you ask them to do it.

It also helps create a culture of continual progress. It sends the message that being in your class means pursuing excellence every day.

Just hold up your list and say:

"Yesterday was a lot of fun, and we accomplished a lot. Thanks for your hard work. A couple things we want to improve today: When I give the 'go' signal to begin group work, be sure and form your groups quickly and start working within one minute.

Also, two students received consequences for calling out and interrupting discussions. Remember, calling out is unfair and wastes time. If you have something to share, I want to hear it. Just be sure and raise your hand."

It's a strategy you may use a lot at the beginning of the year or semester, but then tail off after a few weeks – because you just don't need it anymore.

The most effective teachers have a near-obsession with improvement. They stop and reteach. They rewind to the previous transition. They communicate to students where they are now and where they need to be. They don't settle.

Although it plays a minor role in effective classroom management, reading off an improvement list keeps your students focused on getting better. It wards off backsliding and complacency.

As long as you back it up with consistent accountability, it eliminates those not-so-good moments from happening again and again.

You'll see progress day after day until one morning you'll hold up your list, shrug your shoulders, and say, "I've got nothing. Let's have another great day!"
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