



When And Why You Should Leave Your Students Alone

By Michael Linsin

The picture of an entire class lost in their work is the most beautiful sight in teaching.

Because it's irrefutable proof that your lesson was effective, and that learning, deep and meaningful, is taking place.

Sadly, it's a scene that rarely plays out.

Most teachers find themselves rushing from one student to the next, reteaching what was taught just minutes before. They find themselves calling out reminders and encouragements. They find themselves tamping down disruptions and redirecting off-task behavior.

For some this is done out of necessity. Their lessons and classroom management skills aren't strong enough to support their students through more than a few minutes of truly independent work.

For others, it's become an unfortunate habit. Somewhere along the line they've been led to believe that if they aren't perpetually moving, talking, helping, and cajoling, then they're not being a good teacher.

In either case, they're doing a disservice to their students. They're encouraging (learned) helplessness, shirking responsibility, and [poor listening](#) and attending skills. They're teaching their students to throw in the towel at the slightest adversity.

Exceptional teachers, on the other hand, know that their effectiveness is tied to how well and how long their students are able to work without their direct input.

They know that when they recede into a corner of their classroom to observe, while their students are immersed in deep thought or animated conversation, then true and reliable growth is taking place.

Connections are made. New pathways are discovered. Grooves are deepened. Learning blossoms and flourishes. The students get so lost in the challenges placed before them that the teacher no longer exists.

You know you're on the right track when no hands go up in the air, no one looks in your direction, and you have an intense desire to become invisible – for fear of disrupting the tender hum of production coursing throughout the room.

This is teaching.

Of course, you must present great lessons. You must have spot-on classroom management skills and a stage actor's ability to model precisely what you want. You must wean your students off years of relying on teachers to do much of their work for them.

And you must bite your tongue – for many teachers can't help themselves.

As soon as their students get down to work, they go into [micromanagement](#) mode. They interrupt and bellow suggestions, hints, and asides. They ramble and pace and crash unannounced through personal space.

They disrupt learning.

In this day and age, far too much emphasis is placed on helping individual students and not nearly enough on empowering them to take ownership of their education. When we spoon-feed students we limit their chances for success.

We take the curiosity, the fascination, and the *magic* out of school. We encourage dependence and immaturity and discourage original thought and action. We throw a wet blanket over inspired learning, boring and supporting our students into submission.

To reverse this devastating trend, work on increasing the amount of time your students spend engaged, engrossed, and immersed in learning activities devoid of your hovering presence, even if in the beginning it's only a few minutes a day

Teach cool, high-interest lessons and then hand the ball over to them. Give them back the joy of school, of discovery, of challenge. Let them feel the heady brew of responsibility and exploration.

Do your part, and do it well.

Then step aside and allow your students to do theirs.