

Chapter Eighteen

Eliminating Backtalk

Setting You Up

Fight-Flight Reflexes Again

Imagine that you walk over to Larry who is goofing off, and you give him a prompt to get back to work as described in the preceding chapter. Instead of facing forward as most students would, Larry looks up at you and says:

"I wasn't doin' anything. Why don't you just get out of my face and leave me alone?"

All eyes in the class immediately snap toward you. On every student's face is an expression that says, "Wow! What are you going to do about that Mr. Jones?"

To say that you feel *vulnerable* right now is probably an understatement. Larry has just "gone public" – exactly what Meaning Business tries to avoid. He has made *theater* out of discipline management, and his classmates are all eyes and ears.

There are very few things that a student can do more calculated to upset the teacher than backtalk. By challenging you in front of the entire class, the student says, in effect:

"Hey, you guys! Look over here! This teacher is trying to tell me what to do. I want you all to know that he *can't* because he isn't in control of this situation. *I am!*"

Preview

- To understand the management of backtalk, think in terms of two time frames – a short-term response and a long-term response.
- The short-term response is measured in seconds. It has to do with the fight-flight reflex. If you go to your brainstem instead of relaxing and staying calm, all is lost.
- Backtalk is sudden and threatening and public. Both the fight-flight reflex and the fact that speech is a trigger mechanism set you up to do one thing – speak.
- The Cardinal Error in dealing with backtalk is to speak. The student will play off of whatever you say in order to create a melodrama.
- If you keep your mouth shut in the short-term, backtalk will usually die out. In the long-term you can do whatever you think is appropriate.

If you fail to have a fight-flight reflex under these conditions, you may need to consult a mortician. The rest of us will be sucking in a deep breath.

Setting You Up to Speak

If you have a fight-flight reflex, you are predisposed to speak. *Nagging*, *pheasant posturing*, and *snap and snarl* are simply the names we have given to it. In addition, speech is a *trigger mechanism*. The most predictable way of getting someone to speak to you is for you to speak to them.

When students confront you verbally, everything they are doing seems calculated to *get you to speak*. Could there be a method to this madness?

The Cardinal Error

Having the Last Word

Let's begin with an example of the *garden variety wheedling* that is most common in the classroom. This will be a less emotionally charged situation than the one described above.

The simplest form of wheedling is denial. Denial requires perhaps three neurons.

"I wasn't doin' anything."

"Was not."

To denial we will add its companion, blaming.

"He was asking me a question."

"She started it."

Finally, to this display of garden variety wheedling, we will add a teacher who is committing the *Cardinal Error*. The Cardinal Error when dealing with backtalk is *backtalk*. Taking the scene from the top, it might go like this:

Teacher: "Kathy, I would like you to bring your chair around and get some work done."

Student: "I wasn't doing anything."

Teacher: "You have been talking this whole period, and I want it to stop."

Student: "No I wasn't."

Teacher: "Every time I look up, I see you talking to Tameka."

Student: "She was just asking me a question."

Teacher: "I don't care who was asking who what. When I look up, I expect to see you doing your own work."

Student: "Yeah, but..."

Have you had enough yet? Who do you think will look foolish by the time this conversation winds down?

When you were four years old, you already had the social skills required to have the last word in an argument if you wanted it badly enough. All it takes is perseverance.

The First Rule of Backtalk

Two children arguing is a fairly common sight. But watching a child and a *teacher* argue is more than a bit disconcerting – which brings us to our *first* rule of backtalk:

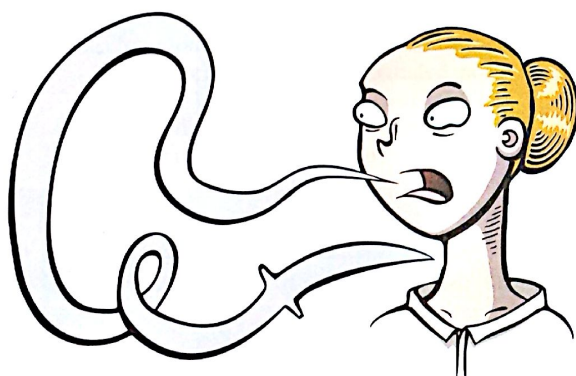
It takes one fool to
backtalk.
It takes two fools
to make a
conversation
out of it.

*It takes one fool to backtalk.
It takes two fools to make a conversation out of it.*

The first fool is the *child*. Children will be foolish sometimes, but the normal immaturity of children does not worry me. What worries me is the *second* fool. The second fool is always the *teacher*. It is the teacher's backtalk that will get this student sent to the office.

One of the most common scenarios for a student being kicked out of class is the following:

- The student mouths off.
- The teacher responds.
- The student mouths off.
- The teacher responds.
- The student mouths off.
- The teacher responds.
- The student mouths off.



Open your mouth, and slit your throat.

By this point in the conversation, teachers usually realize that they have dug their hole so deep that the only way out is to "pull rank." That is why backtalk is the most common complaint in office referrals.

Roles in a Melodrama

Think of backtalk as a melodrama which is written, produced, and directed by the *student*. In this melodrama there is a speaking part for *you*.

If you accept your speaking part in the melodrama, it is "show time." But if you do not, the show bombs. This brings us to our *second* rule of backtalk:

Open your mouth, and slit your throat.

Imagine the conversation between teacher and student described earlier if the teacher had had the good sense to keep his or her *mouth shut*.

Teacher: "Kathy, I would like you to bring your chair around and get some work done."

Student: "I wasn't doing anything."

Teacher: (silence)

Student: "Well, I wasn't."

Teacher: (silence)

Student: "But..."

Teacher: (silence)

Student: (silence)

Students may try to keep the scene going for a while, but, as they say in showbiz, "There's nothing worse than playing to a dead house." When backtalkers run out of material, embarrassment sets in. That is when they fold. Getting back to work suddenly becomes the quickest way to disappear.

If you talk, you actually *rescue* backtalkers from their dilemma. It is like throwing a lifeline to a drowning person. By playing off of whatever you say, he or she can keep the show alive and avoid “going down for the third time.”

A Comedy Routine

Think of backtalk as a comedy routine – a classroom comedy duo. There are many duos in the history of comedy: Laurel and Hardy, Abbot and Costello, Burns and Allen, Martin and Lewis.

Comedy duos all have a predictable format. There is a “clown” and a “straight man.” The straight man sets up the jokes by delivering “straight lines” like:

“How bad was it?”

“Then what happened?”

“Why did you do that?”

In the classroom comedy duo, the *student* is the *clown* and the *teacher* is the *straight man*. The clown plays off of the lines delivered by the teacher.

Ironically, no matter how much you may hate backtalk, when you speak, you become the disruptive student’s *partner*. This brings us to our *third* rule of backtalk:

*If students want to backtalk,
at least make them do all of the work.
Don’t do half of it for them!*

Think of backtalk as self-limiting. You have to feed it to make it grow. If you do not feed it, it will starve. Or, think

of it this way. Opening your mouth is like throwing gasoline on a fire. Do you want it to die down or blow up in your face?

Types of Backtalk

Few things trigger a fight-flight reflex more predictably than *surprise*. The backtalk itself is usually a surprise, but what the student says can also be a shock.

If we can reduce the surprise factor inherent in backtalk, we can reduce the probability of a fight-flight reflex. For that reason, it is useful to know exactly what to expect.

Fortunately for us, backtalk is one of the *least* creative endeavors of the disruptive student. Mouthy students have been saying the same things since little Babylonian kids went to school.

With adequate preparation, you can respond to backtalk with emotional nonchalance. When you relax your jaw in this situation, you look *bored* – a lack of expression described by trainees as “withering boredom.” Backtalkers find this lack of response most disheartening.

We will look at the types of backtalk that students typically use. Backtalk can be grouped under three general headings:

- Switching the agenda
- Whiny backtalk
- Nasty backtalk

If the students
want to backtalk, at
least make them do
all of the work.

Switching the Agenda

Seducing the Teacher

There are three agendas in classroom management: discipline, instruction, and motivation. As you know from previous chapters, these three agendas represent very different management procedures. While these procedures compliment each other, they do not greatly overlap.

Consequently, if students can seduce the teacher from discipline into either of the other two agendas, discipline management is left behind. This is a very shrewd move for disruptive students since they get off the hook with almost no risk of provoking the teacher.

Switching to Instruction

The most common switch is from discipline to instruction. It delivers maximum benefit at minimum risk.

Have you ever prompted a student who is *talking to neighbors* by saying,

“I would like you to turn around and get to work,”

only to have the student look up and say,

“But, I don’t understand how to do this problem?”

You ought to give the student extra credit for knowing how to play the game.

Recognizing Backtalk

The way you recognize backtalk is by the fact that the kid’s mouth is open.

Now, let me show you a naive teacher taking the bait. In response to the student’s help-seeking, the teacher says,

“What part don’t you understand?”

It’s over! You lose! You may as well say to the class,

“Class, let me explain what just happened so you will all understand. Go ahead and *talk* to your neighbors. If I see you goofing off, and if I walk all of the way over to your desk in order to deal with it, this is what you do. Look up innocently and say, ‘But, I don’t understand how to do this problem.’ The worst thing that will ever happen to you in my class is that I will do part of your assignment for you.”

Not too surprisingly, most backtalk in any classroom is switching the agenda to instruction. Switching the agenda to instruction is such a cool plan that I sometimes wonder why students would do anything else. It is a no-lose strategy. Students run no risk of getting into trouble because teachers never identify *switching the agenda* as backtalk. Teachers seem to think that backtalk has to be obnoxious. It does not.

At this point you may be wondering, “Well, then, what is backtalk?” Let me give you a simple answer to save you confusion. The way you recognize backtalk is by the fact that *the kid’s mouth is open*.

“So, what should I do?” you might ask. This is a very tricky question, which is another reason why students love to use “switching the agenda” as their strategy of choice.

Let me give you the easy answer first. Take two relaxing breaths, check your jaw, clear your mind, and keep your mouth shut as you kill time. When the backtalker runs out of gas, take two more relaxing breaths and then, if you need to, give a nonverbal prompt to get back to work.

Sometimes this actually works. Chalk it up to finesse and luck. But, if the student wants to up the ante, all he or she has to say is,

"Well, I don't know how! What am I supposed to do? Are you just going to look at me?"

This move exposes the vulnerability of our previous strategy. Maybe the student really *does not* know how to do the problem. Or, maybe the student *does* know how and is just "messaging with you." How would you know?

The student has you over a barrel, and the student knows it. Consequently, teachers who have not caved in by now usually fold at this point by saying,

"What part don't you understand?"

When trying to get off the hook, students act like lawyers. They think, "Do I have a case?" This student obviously has a good case. How can *you* say that they *do* know how to do the problem when *they* say that they *don't*?

The only satisfactory answer to this question lies in all of the instructional procedures described in the first half of the book – *weaning the helpless handraisers*, *Praise*, *Prompt*, and *Leave*, *Visual Instructional Plans*, and *Say, See, Do Teaching with adequate Structured Practice*. With all of this, you know very well that the students "knew how" before you made your transition to Guided Practice.

Consequently, the students don't have a leg to stand on when making a case for needing help. They know it, and they know that you know it. As a result, they will not even try to switch the agenda. Or, if they do, they will lack the self-righteous zeal required to withstand a dose of withering boredom.

In contrast, if you teach in the Bop 'til You Drop style, you will not have a clue as to what the students know after your transition to Guided Practice. The students know this. The students therefore have a good case for pleading ignorance, and you may expect them to pursue their case with panache.

Let's add another level to the student's game playing. Students know *why* we went into teaching. We want to see students *learn*. We love students who *want* to learn.

Clever students will use this insight to get off the hook when they get cornered. They will look you in the eye and, with utter sincerity, give you exactly what you want to hear. They will ask for help, as though to say, "*This is the magic moment. I am burning with curiosity. Teach me! Teach me!*"

When a teacher says, "What part don't you understand?" the visual image that comes to mind is a fish with a hook in its mouth being reeled in.

Switching to Motivation

While not as common as switching the agenda to instruction, switching to motivation has one big advantage. It gives the student *control*. It is the *power* move.

"I'm not doing this."

"This is dumb."

"We did this last year."

To clarify the issue of power and control, you cannot *make* students work. You cannot make them think. You cannot even make them pick up a pencil. The students control their own nervous systems. Students will think and write when they direct their own bodies to do so.

Therefore, *forcing* unmotivated students to work is a dead issue. You cannot intimidate them. You can only flunk them, and they don't care. Not caring gives them their power.

Switching to Instruction

Even if students do not get off the hook, which they almost always do, they run no risk of getting "into trouble." It is a no-lose strategy.

Switching to Motivation

As a simple issue of power and control, you cannot *make students work*. You cannot make them think. You cannot even make them pick up a pencil.

In the long run, if you want students to do schoolwork, you must give them a *positive* reason to do so – something that they *choose*. You will have to answer the question, “Why should I?” This will require some real expertise in

the technology of incentive management. (See Chapters 9 and 10 for a discussion of motivation.)

In the short run, in lieu of incentives, you can always cut your losses. Whisper privately to the student,

“If you are not going to do your work, we can talk about that later. For right now, I will at least expect you to allow your neighbors to do *their* work.”

Most students will take this opportunity to cut their losses. Escalating at this point represents a student who is looking for an altercation.

Whiny Backtalk

Whiny backtalk is what I referred to earlier as “garden variety” backtalk. It is the common, unremarkable, everyday self-justification that students most often employ when trying to get off the hook. These are the types of backtalk that “good kids” have used since the beginning of time. The main types are as follows:

Denial

“I wasn’t doin’ anything.”

“We weren’t talking.”

“I’m not chewing gum.”

As you can see, this is a *very* simple strategy. It does, however, raise an important question. That question is, *Are you blind?* If you are a sighted individual, there is nothing to debate. You *saw* it.

Take two relaxing breaths, kill some time, and *keep your mouth shut*. This too shall pass.

Blaming Your Neighbor

“She was talking, not me.”

“They started it.”

“He was just asking me a question.”

Blaming, also known as “ratting on your neighbor,” is where students go when denial is not working. You can hear the absurdity of a lame excuse if you *paraphrase*.

“Gee, teacher, we weren’t goofing off when we were talking. We were operating a peer tutoring program to further our education.”

Seeing the humor in backtalk is a wonderful defense against having a fight-flight reflex. Instead of thinking, “*Say, what?*” you think, “*Yeah, right.*”

Blaming the Teacher

If you can’t blame the person sitting next to you, blame the teacher. After all, the teacher is handy.

“I had to ask him because you went over it so fast.”

“I had to ask her because I can’t read your handwriting.”

“I had to ask him because you didn’t make it clear.”

The student always blames the teacher for the same shortcoming – *professional incompetence*. Now, the absurdity of the excuse is even more palpable.

"Gee, teacher, we weren't goofing off back here. We were operating a peer tutoring program in order to compensate for your methodological deficiencies in the area of instruction."

An accusation of incompetence can make a person defensive. I have seen teachers bite on this bait.

"I went over this material step by step not ten minutes ago. It is written right up there on the board if you would care to read it. Now, I am sick and tired..."

The hook is firmly set. Reel 'em in.

Excusing You to Leave

With this version of whiny backtalk, the student is telling you, in effect, to go take a hike. Of course, only a high-roller would say, "Hey, teacher, go take a hike." With whiny backtalkers, the message takes the following variations:

- **Short Form:** "All right, I'll do it."
- **Long Form:** "All right, I'll do it if you just leave me alone."
- **Nasty Form:** "All right, I'll do it if you just get out of my face! I can't work with you standing over me like that!"
- **Emotionally Handicapped Form:** "Geez, what are you, some kind of pervert? Leave me alone!"

As always, relax, be quiet, and wait. Do not allow yourself to be suckered into the Cardinal Error. If you succeed in the short-term, you can do anything you want in the long-term.

Compliment

Sometimes a student will give the teacher a "goodie-two-shoes compliment." This student is attempting to get off the hook while scoring a few brownie points by diverting the teacher's attention. Think of it as just another flavor of baloney.

I have seen teachers thrown off by this tactic. I remember one fourth grade girl who said,



If denial doesn't work, you can always try ratting on your neighbor.

"Oh, Mrs. Johnson, what a beautiful pin."

Mrs. Johnson stood up, looked at the pin and said,

"Why, thank you, dear. I got that for my birthday. Now, you get some work done."

Mrs. Johnson wandered off with a contented smile on her face. Before long the student was talking again.

Nonverbal Backtalk

This may sound like an oxymoron, but it is an apt title for control tactics that function like backtalk without the risk of "lipping off." Here are some common variants:

Cry

If all else fails, try blubbering. If crying gets kids off the hook at home, they may try it at school. Some parents start apologizing as soon as the tears flow.

Stay down, relax, and wait. If you hang in there, blubbering students will eventually dry up. Then they will look up to see if you are still there. When they realize that the gambit did not work, the cheapest way for them to cut their losses is to get back to work.

While the whole process may take some time, consider it a good investment. If the tears are interminable, however, you can always cut your losses. Similar to cutting your losses when a student plays the motivation card, lean over and whisper gently,

"We can talk about your crying later. For right now, the least I will expect from you is that you get your work done."

Leave, but return soon after the student's head comes up. Rather than getting rid of you, the student who used crying to get off the hook receives some follow through and "instructional supervision" from close range.

Push You Aside

Sometimes students will push your arm away if you lean on the desk. Is this a big deal or not?

You could, of course, make a big deal out of it. It was, after all, a rather impudent thing to do. But, chances are, it was more reflex than strategy on the part of the student. No point in making a mountain out of a molehill.

Try "rubber arm." Relax the arm that has been pushed aside and *stay down*. Hang in there and wait without backing off.

The student, confronted by an immovable object, must now finally deal with your presence. At this point he or she usually realizes that getting back to work is the cheapest way out. You can always talk to the student later if you wish.

A Kiss on the Nose

This has only happened once in my experience, but it is a good story for highlighting the power of doing nothing. It comes from a first-rate female junior high teacher in a suburb of Minneapolis who was a trainer for me in her school district.

She had the original "Joe Cool" in her classroom – three sport letterman, good looking, liked by the girls and a bit of an imp. He was talking to his buddy to the extent that the teacher finally moved in to "palms" on his desk. He looked up at the teacher, leaned forward, and *gave her a kiss on the nose*.

We had not practiced this move during training, of course. But, she remembered to take two relaxing breaths, stay down and *do nothing*. Joe obviously expected to get a "rise" out of the teacher. All eyes were on him. It came as a surprise when nothing happened. It became embarrassing when nothing *at all* happened.

Some classmates giggled. Joe blushed. The teacher just looked at him and waited, but her lack of emotion came across as nonchalance, as though to say, "This happens to me all of the time."

Joe wilted. He looked for a place to hide but had to settle for getting back to work. I am told that he never tried anything like that again.

This story highlights our general strategy for dealing with the unexpected:

When in doubt, do nothing.

This may not seem like much of a strategy, but, in the heat of the moment, it can be a life-saver. Would you rather respond impulsively or have some time to think?

Basic Short-Term Moves

What do you do with your body in the short-term when a student backtalks? Imagine that you are giving a prompt or are at "palms" when the student mouths off. Also, imagine typical kids and whiny backtalk. We will deal with nasty situations later.

The simplest thing to do, of course, is nothing. Just remain at palms. This provides enough proximity for the student to "feel your presence." Kill some time and wait.

However, if the student keeps talking in order to gain the upper hand or "back you off," you may wish to signal to him or her that this is a foolish strategy. The easiest way to signal this is by *moving closer*.

Camping Out in Front

In response to continued backtalk (i.e., the student's *second sentence*), bend one elbow and gently move down so that your elbow is resting on the table. This gets you closer to the student and improves eye contact.

Take two relaxing breaths, keep your mouth shut, and wait. This move usually dashes the student's hopes.



*In response to continued backtalk,
bend one elbow and gently move closer.*

Camping Out from Behind

In sports (and discipline management is an indoor sport), offensive strategy can be summarized as follows: *Two good athletes can beat one good athlete.* Consequently, successful offense is synonymous with “two-on-one,” “overloading the zone,” or “the power play.” Different sports have different names for it.



You may prefer Camping Out from Behind if you want to isolate the backtalker.

In the classroom, therefore, do not be surprised if backtalking students try to go two-on-one if you fail to rise to their bait. When whiney backtalk is failing, they may turn to an accomplice in order to “double team” you.

“Tameka was just asking me a question, (turning to Tameka) right?”

Often, the second student will “cool it” because he or she would rather disappear than up the ante. If you hang in there and wait quietly in this situation, the first student usually folds.

But, if the second student chimes in, you have two-on-one. You have a more serious problem if they start to feed off of each other. Kill some time in order to check it out. Often, the gambit will fizzle after a few whiny self-justifications.

If, however, the gambit takes wing so that the two students are working you over, you will have to switch strategies. You need to reestablish “one-on-one” with the backtalker, and you *cannot separate* the two students with your mouth.

Rather, you will need to *separate* the students with your *body*. Stand slowly and walk slowly around the desks so that you are standing behind and between the two students. Then, slowly move down between them so that your elbow is on the table and you are facing the first student. This isolates the backtalker.

Once isolated, the backtalker usually folds. Stay down and wait until you have a stable commitment to work. Thank the student as you normally would, and then stay down to ensure that he or she keeps working. Then, turn toward the second student and repeat the process. Next, stand between them for two relaxing breaths before moving around to the front. From there, move out as usual.

Camping out from behind actually happens most often as a low-key interaction when you are working the crowd. If, for example, you were *behind* the disruptive students, you would probably just stroll over and stand between them. You might even lean down to give a prompt just to make your presence felt. I can remember teachers doing this when I was a kid. Camping out from behind has been around for a long time.

Curve Balls

Sometimes, just as you relax, thinking that the backtalk is over, a student hits you with something that you did not expect. If your relaxation is less than it should be, this jolt may send you over the edge. As always, to be forewarned is to be forearmed. The two most common curve balls are: *the last hurrah* and *the cheap shot*.

The Last Hurrah

After the backtalk dies out and the disruptive student returns to work, thank the student as a closure message to indicate that the "incident" is over. Sometimes, however, the student does not want the "incident" to be over. At such times, your "thank you" may trigger a "snotty" comeback from the student that I have named "the last hurrah." See if you recognize any of these examples.

Teacher: "Thank you, Donna."

Donna: "Yeah, right," or

"You didn't help me any," or

"Just leave me alone," or

"Whatever," or

"Thank you, Donna." (mockingly)

This mouthy student would love to have the last word, and if you were to "lose it," that would be just icing on the

cake. Instead, stay down, take two relaxing breaths, and deliver some withering boredom as you wait.

If the kid had kept quiet, you would be gone. Instead, you are still at "palms," or "camping out." As always, if backtalk fails to get a "rise" out of the teacher, it backfires.

After the student once again returns to the assignment and shows a stable pattern of work, thank him or her once again just as you did before. The student will most likely remain silent this time. This "thank you" is rich in meaning. Call it *metacommunication*. It says:

- That is what I wanted;
- You can relax now;
- We will do it my way, won't we?

As always, finesse allows you to be gentle while being powerful. In addition, it places you above the student's pettiness and game playing.

The Cheap Shot

Sometimes as you *turn your back* to walk away after thanking the disruptor, the student hits you with a parting "cheap shot." It is usually just a word or two muttered under the breath, such as:

"Big deal," or

"Ooooh," or

"I'm scared."

You need a plan. If you are trying to figure out what to do as classmates giggle, you will probably overreact.

Naturally, you cannot allow the student to have a mocking "last word." On the other hand, it would be nice to keep your response cheap. The most efficient response, called "Instant Replay," simply repeats *moving in* and *moving out* with a few slight alterations.

Stop when you hear the *cheap shot*, take a relaxing breath, and turn slowly to face the student. The student already knows at this point that the gamble has backfired. The gamble was that you would pretend not to hear the remark and *keep walking* while the student got the last word.

It is just as foolish to turn a *deaf ear* to disruption as it is to turn a *blind eye*. You will have to deal with the *cheap shot*, and you will have to invest enough time to convey that it is serious.

Walk to the edge of the student's desk so that you barely touch it with your legs as you normally would in *moving in*, and take two relaxing breaths. Then, slowly move down to "palms." Now, just kill time from close range. The longer you stay, the higher the cost of the *cheap shot* becomes. Had the student remained quiet, you would be gone.

After you get a stable commitment to work, thank the student and stay down. Then, stand, take a relaxing breath or two, and move out. It is extremely unlikely that the *cheap shot* will be repeated. You have made your point. Cheap shots are *not cheap*.

One wrinkle in this plan occurs when the disruptive students are of the same gender so that you cannot tell from the voice who made the remark. Never overplay your hand by pretending to know more than you actually do. The students know that you couldn't tell who spoke.

Finesse the situation by going to palms between the two students so that you camp out "in the general vicinity." Then, when you thank the students for getting back to work, speak collectively. Just say,

"I appreciate your getting back to work."

If one of them says, "I didn't do it," relax and give them a dose of withering boredom.

Post Script

As a post script to this detailed discussion of camping out, you should know that having to camp out is an extreme rarity. I felt obligated to go into detail so that you would not find yourself in the middle of an altercation thinking, "Oh great, Dr. Jones! Now what do I do?"

However, if you have established that you mean business, management is done with subtle gestures and small consequences. One of my trainees spoke for many others when she said,

"I finally went to camping out just to see what it felt like. When you are using the rest of the system, you almost never even have to walk over to the students."

Nasty Backtalk

Nasty backtalk definitely increases the price of playing poker. We will refer to it as "high-rolling." The student is risking all in order to get control.

What separates nasty backtalk from whiny backtalk is not so much the words, but rather, the fact that it is *personal*. The backtalker is probing for a nerve ending. Experienced teachers know the following:

Never take anything a student says personally.

If you take what was said personally, you are very likely to overreact. If you do, the student has succeeded.

It is just as foolish
to turn
a 'deaf ear'
to disruption
as it is to turn a
'blind eye.'

There are two major types of nasty backtalk: *insult* and *profanity*. Once again, to be familiar with them reduces the element of surprise.

Insult

There are a limited number of topics that students can use for insults. The main ones are:

- **Dress**

"Say, where did you get that tie, Mr. Jones? Goodwill?"

"Hey, Mr. Mickelson, is that the only sport coat you own?"

- **Grooming**

"Hey, Mr. Gibson, you have hairs growing out of your nose. Did you know that?"

"Whoa, Mrs. Wilson! You have dark roots! I didn't know you bleached your hair. Ha ha ha."

- **Hygiene**

"Hey, don't get so close. You smell like garlic."

"Hey, Mrs. Phillips, your breath is worse than my dog's!"

Are you ready to ring the kid's neck yet? That is the point, after all.

Take two relaxing breaths. When the sniggering dies down, the kid is still on the hook. If you are in your *cortex*, you can make a plan. Right now I am not so much concerned with your plan as I am with the fact that you are in your cortex.

Profanity

There are a limited number of swear words that students can use in the classroom. Chances are, you are familiar with all of them. There are your everyday vulgarisms, and then there are your "biggies."

Now, ask yourself, what is the real agenda underlying vulgarity? As always, it has to do with *power*. The question of power boils down to a question of *control*. Who controls the classroom? This in turn boils down to the question of who controls *you*.

Can a four-letter monosyllable control *you* and determine your emotions and your behavior? If so, then the student possesses a great deal of power packaged in the form of a single word.



Relax, tune out, and make the student do all of the work.

You know that, if you give Larry this much power, he will use it. And, if control comes quickly and predictably, he will use it again and again.

Responding to Nasty Backtalk

To understand the management of backtalk, and especially nasty backtalk, you must conceptualize your response in terms of *two* time frames, *short-term* and *long-term*. The short-term time frame is very short: two or three seconds.

Short-Term Response

The correct short-term response, as you might imagine, has to do with the fight-flight reflex. Take two relaxing breaths, remain quiet, and deliver some withering boredom.

If you are in your cortex, you can use good judgement and choose a long-term response that fits the situation. If, however, you are in your brainstem, judgement is out of the question. Consequently, if you succeed in the short-term, you will probably succeed in the long-term. But, if you fail in the short-term, all is lost.

Your *lack* of an immediate response is very powerful body language. It tells the student, among other things, that you are no rookie. You have heard it all a thousand times.

If the student runs out of gas and takes refuge in getting back to work, you have “finessed” the incident (and gotten somewhat lucky). Count your blessings, and consider getting on with the lesson. You can always talk to the student after class.

Do not worry that students will think, “Mr. Jones didn’t do anything about Larry’s profanity.” Give them some credit for social intelligence. They just saw Larry try “the big one” and fail. They saw you handle it like an old pro. And they learned that profanity is useless in this classroom as a tool for getting the best of the teacher.

They will certainly know that profanity is not taken lightly when, on the way out of class, you say, “Larry, I would like to speak with you for a moment.” Of course, you need to be standing in the doorway when you say this.

Long-Term Response

Your short-term response does not foreclose any management options. It simply gives you time to think while avoiding the Cardinal Error.

In the long-term, you can do whatever you think is appropriate. You know your options. If in your opinion the student should be sent to the office or suspended, then *do it*. Just do it calmly.

If you are calm, your actions come across with an air of cool professionalism. You are above the storm.

This calm helps students accept responsibility for their own actions. Of course, this is the last thing they want to do. They would love to have a nail upon which to hang responsibility so it is not *their* fault. If you are the least bit “out of line” by becoming upset, you have just provided that nail. However, it is hard for students to blame someone else when *they* are the only ones acting badly.

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The Clinical Dimension

Imagine a situation in which a student says some ugly things in the middle of class, and you finesse the situation so that the student falls silent and returns to work. Imagine also that you keep the student after class for a talk. What do you say?

For starters, let's consider the context. When the student used insult or profanity, was he or she acting in a typical or an atypical fashion? Let's imagine a student who was acting *atypically*.

If you take the student's remarks personally, your upset will get in the way of your thinking. If, on the other hand, you are in your cortex, you can engage in problem solving. With even some simple clinical skills, you can do a lot of good.

The student is upset about something, but that something is probably *not you* since you have not seen this student for the past 23 hours. Chances are, he or she is upset about something that happened outside of class.

I would certainly want to know what that something was before I went to "consequences." Otherwise, I would run a very high risk of heaping one hurt on top of another.

A Therapeutic Conversation

When you have a conversation with the student after the others have left, you become a clinician. Being a clinician is straightforward in a simple situation like this.

People seek therapy for one reason; they are in *pain*. They seek one outcome: the *alleviation* of pain. These two simple realities give you your starting point for a conversation about the inappropriate behavior in class.

"Vanessa, what you said in class today was not at all like you. Tell me, what is really going on?"

Take two relaxing breaths and thwart the desire to say anything else. This is called "wait time." You do not know what will happen next. You can open the door, but you cannot make Vanessa walk through it. She might say,

"Nothing! I just want to leave!"

But, before you go to "consequences," play for time. Silence is truly golden since young people have a very low tolerance for it. If you wait calmly, the whole story will probably come spilling out. Do not be surprised if the lip starts to quiver. Have some tissues handy.

After Vanessa spills her story, you may want to give her a pass to the nurse's office so that she can pull herself together before

reporting to her next class. Make sure she knows that you will be available after school. Do not be surprised if she shows up.

A Different Relationship

Over the years, I have had more than a few trainees who, when faced with exactly this situation, had the presence of mind to "open the door." One teacher spoke for them all when she said,

Minimizing Stress

While there are many types of backtalk, fortunately, there is only one immediate response.

Take two relaxing breaths.

You protect yourself from stress while you protect the student from making matters worse.

"I would be lying if I were to say that I was relaxed after what that student said to me in class. I kept him back as you suggested, but part of me just wanted to send him to the office. I forced myself to ask him what the 'real' problem was. I took some semi-relaxing breaths. Then, he began to spill the beans.

"I kept the next class in the hall for a minute while he pulled himself together. That was the turning point in our relationship. He has been a different child in my class from that day until now."

Young people need adults to look up to. Sometimes, all they get from the adults at home is verbal and physical abuse. But their hunger for positive adult role models can be used for healing if you know how.

Vanessa was upset in class today, obviously enough. But, she was also instinctively testing you to see if you were as uncaring as other adults in her life. She probably expected the worst – an angry teacher and a trip to the office. It would not have surprised her.

What does surprise students in this situation is to find a teacher who says, "I can see that you are hurting. Tell me about it." It catches them off guard. Sometimes their defenses crumble because they are so unaccustomed to anybody caring about whether or not they hurt.

Sometimes, healing is mediated by simply taking the time to ask and to listen. Without going that far out on a

limb, you can answer the defining question in your relationship with the child, "*Do you even care?*"

Reconciliation

Power is not the goal of Meaning Business. Power is a means to an end. It is simply a tool that can be used for good or ill.

The goal of Meaning Business is *reconciliation*. Our calmness and skill allow us to say "no" to backtalk while potentially *strengthening* the fabric of our relationship with the student rather than tearing it.

An interaction with another human being is more pregnant with possibilities the more emotionally intense it is. A student's crisis in class, therefore, presents us with a rare opportunity. Depending upon our calmness and skill, we can often turn this crisis toward a constructive end.

In everyday child rearing, the heart-to-heart talks that are remembered usually come on the heels of a crisis of some kind – usually accompanied by tears. These heart-to-heart talks are some of the most precious moments between adult and child. They teach important lessons within a context that says that being "bad," while it leads to

real consequences, cannot threaten the bond of caring.

If we react from our brainstem, as the student's parents might, we confirm the student's worst expectations. But if we have the presence of mind to simply ask and listen, we can open the door to a different way of relating.



**The ultimate
goal of
Meaning Business
is reconciliation.**