

## Chapter One

# Learning from the “Natural” Teachers

### Succeeding in the Classroom

#### *Focus on Teachers*

This book is for teachers. I want teachers to enjoy teaching.

I know teachers who thrive in the classroom. They are energized by teaching. I have heard them say, “I can’t wait until school starts.” These teachers, however, are a distinct minority.

Most teachers are exhausted by the end of the day. Almost a third of new teachers quit by the end of their second year on the job. Many who stay suffer from burn-out.

Most of the stress of teaching comes from getting students to do things. Managing the

behavior of young people is no easy job, as any parent can tell you. Managing a whole classroom full of young people is the subject of this book.

#### *Focus on Students*

This book is for the students. For students to learn, they must enjoy learning. They must look forward to entering the classroom in the morning.

Some teachers create just such classrooms. They make learning an adventure. There is excitement in the air.

It is no mystery to the parents who these teachers are. They can see how one teacher causes their child to love school while another teacher causes the same child to

### Preview

- All of our efforts to improve education come down to the classroom. Whether or not lessons come alive and students learn depends upon the teacher’s skill.
- In some fortunate classrooms, both the teacher and the students look forward to getting to school in the morning. This book describes how to produce such classrooms.
- Many of the lessons in this book were learned in the classrooms of gifted or “natural” teachers. As a result, the procedures described are practical and down to earth.
- Natural teachers do not work themselves to death. Instead, they put the students to work.
- Effective management saves you time and effort. As a result, you have more time for learning and enjoyment in the classroom, and more energy after you get home.

complain and fall behind. Parents know that the key to success in the classroom is the teacher.

### ***Focus on Classrooms***

All of our efforts to improve education come down to the classroom. National policies and state mandates and district guidelines must be translated into better teaching practices, or they are of no use.

Whether or not lessons come alive and students learn depends upon the teacher's skill. Whether or not the students are even on task depends on the teacher's ability to manage the group.

This book is about classroom management. It is a description of the skills that exceptional teachers use to make classrooms come alive.

### **Enjoying Teaching**

#### ***Learning by Doing***

Students learn by doing. They like being active. Even more, they like being *interactive*.

Students enjoy learning when the process of instruction engages all of their senses. When the students enjoy learning, teachers enjoy teaching.

### ***Reducing "Goofing Off"***

Within the classroom, the main impediment to learning by doing is *not doing*. The many ways of *not doing* are known to us all from experience – whispering to the kid sitting next to us, passing notes, sharpening pencils just to be out of our seats, doodling, dawdling and gazing out the window. We will refer to these pleasures of the flesh collectively as “goofing off.”

Teaching a lesson would not be so hard if the students would just pay attention and get to work. It is the *goofing off* that wears you down.

### ***Working Yourself to Death***

While trying to deal with goofing off, you have to get the kids to do one thing after another all day long – hand papers in, pass papers out, get into groups, line up, sit down, pay attention, take turns. How about the students who sit helplessly with their hands raised day after day and say, “I don't understand how to do this!”? How about the students who say, “This is stupid!”?

After school you have parent conferences, committee meetings, and paper grading. You are on your toes all day long, and then you keep working into the evening. You can *run yourself ragged*.



*You are on your toes all day long.*



But, some of our colleagues find the job *energizing*. These teachers do not work themselves to death. They work *smart*, not hard.

### Lessons from Natural Teachers

#### *We Have a Problem*

The year was 1969, and I was asked to consult at a private school for emotionally, behaviorally, and learning handicapped junior-high-age students. All of them had been “removed” from the Los Angeles Unified School District. I had just been given a free ticket to the all-star game of classroom goof-offs.

On my first visit, I observed four classrooms, two in the morning and two in the afternoon. The two I observed in the morning were a shock.

As I approached the first classroom, I could hear yelling. As I entered, I saw only empty chairs. I looked to my left and saw, to my amazement, nine kids crouched *on top of the coat closet* staring at me. I thought, “What an unusual lesson format.”

Then, a half-dozen other kids poured out of the coat closet. They were armed with items of clothing with which

they began pelting the students above. One student leapt from on top of the coat closet to wrestle a classmate to the floor.

In front of this scene was a male teacher who was donating his body to the betterment of young people – his stomach lining, his dental work, and his circulatory system – as many of us do. With arms folded, teeth clenched and a look of grim desperation he shouted,

“Group!”

This worried me. I am a clinical psychologist by training, and I had spent years working with groups – group process, group dynamics, group communication, group problem-solving. I didn’t see any *group*.

Then, the teacher said,

“I am simply going to *wait* until you *all* settle down!”

I didn’t know how long he had been waiting. It was November.

The second classroom I visited that morning was almost as bad. A young female teacher was leading a class discussion. I could tell because everyone was talking. Who do you think was



*Then, you keep working into the evening.*

## Section One: Building a Classroom Management System

talking louder than any of the students?

"Class. There is absolutely *no excuse* for all of this noise!... Class!..."

By the end of the morning, I desperately wanted to leave. But, since I had promised, I stuck it out past lunch.

### *Observing Two "Naturals"*

After lunch I watched the students who had been on top of the coat closet enter a new teacher's classroom. The teacher greeted them warmly at the door. The students took their seats as they entered, looked at the chalkboard where an assignment was posted, and went to work.

When the bell to begin class rang, only one or two looked up. The students worked on a math assignment for about ten minutes. Then there was a lesson transition. The teacher said,

"I want you to place your papers here on the corner of my desk. If you need to sharpen pencils, now is the time to do it. Get a drink of water if you need to, and return to your seats."

I thought, "This is where chaos sets in."

However, the students did as the teacher instructed and were back in their seats ready to go in *41 seconds*. The teacher then conducted a group discussion in which the students *took turns*. Since the faculty at UCLA couldn't do that on the best day of their lives, I was thoroughly impressed. Throughout the class period these students behaved like any well-mannered group of kids.

I might have written this experience off as a fluke had not the second teacher of the afternoon gotten similar results with the refugees from that morning's group discussion. She had her own style, of course, but, with apparent ease, she got respectful behavior and good work.

As far as the management of goofing off is concerned, I observed three characteristics of these teachers that I will never forget.

- They were not working hard at discipline management. In fact, they were not working very hard at all.
- They were relaxed.
- They were emotionally warm.

At the very least, I learned that discipline management did not have to be humorless or stressful or time-consuming. You certainly do not have to wait until December to smile. Rather, these teachers had the simple luxury of enjoying the process of teaching.

How could two classes that were so out of control in one setting look so normal in another setting? I returned to these classrooms for several days hoping to discover the secret. All I saw was two "naturals" making it look easy. I scheduled a meeting on Thursday afternoon to find out how they did it.

### *They Didn't Have a Clue*

These two teachers could not have been more generous in their efforts to help me understand their teaching methods. Unfortunately, they did not help very much.

I said, "How do you get the kids to behave so well?"

They both said, "You have to *mean business*."

### First Impressions of Naturals

- They were not working hard at discipline management. In fact, they were not working very hard at all.
- They were relaxed.
- They were emotionally warm.



I said, “Right! But exactly how do you mean business?”

They said, “On the first day of school the classroom will either belong to *you* or it will belong to *them*. God help you if it belongs to them.”

I said, “Right! But how do you do it?”

They said, “Frankly, a lot of it has to do with *expectations*. Their behavior will not exceed your expectations. If you do not expect them to behave and to learn, they won’t.”

I said, “Right! How do you get them to do that?”

They said, “Well, a lot of it has to do with your *values*. If you value every child as a learner...”

I said, “*Wait!* Give me credit for good values and high expectations. I want to know *what to do*. Imagine that I am a substitute teacher taking over your class tomorrow morning. You obviously have the students in a groove. I don’t want to lose it. I’m standing in front of your class. Now, what do I do?”

“Oh, yes,” they said. “I see. Hmm. Well, I can tell you this much. You had better mean business.”

On that day I learned something remarkable about these natural teachers. They could not tell me what they were doing if their lives depended on it. They had no technology of management. They had *good instincts*.

## The Classroom Through New Eyes

### *The Behavior Modification Revolution*

The reason this private school for the behaviorally “challenged” had called us at UCLA was because we were behavior management hot-shots. At that time we were in the throes of the “behavior modification revolution.” We

had learned that consequences govern the rate of behavior, and we were setting up management programs to fix all kinds of problems – acting out, social isolation, you name it.

### *Problems of Cost*

I was not impressed with the behavior modification revolution. Perhaps it was because I come from a family of teachers – mother, sister, aunts, cousins. When we get together, it is like a staff development conference.

Growing up in such a family, I learned certain things about the teaching profession without anyone ever having to tell me. Prominent among them were:

- Teachers work twice as hard as the general public will ever imagine.
- The last thing in the world that a teacher will ever have is “extra” time.

I knew from the beginning that if I came up with some hot new classroom management procedure that cost the teacher *time* – for planning or record keeping – I could forget it. For any system of classroom management to be truly helpful, it must *save* time.

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‘extra’ time.

The problem with our fancy behavior modification programs was *cost*. We were designing individualized management programs. Each program required planning conferences, data collection, specialized contingencies, and constant monitoring.

The good news was that these programs worked. The bad news was that they cost an arm and a leg. I once calculated that implementation of one of my "B-Mod" programs consumed about 20 minutes of the teacher's time each day. There goes the planning period. And the teacher had at least a dozen other problems in the class that were just as serious.

#### **Management At No Cost**

Suddenly I was looking at teachers who could get the students – all of them – to shape up and do what was expected at *no cost*. There were no formal behavior management programs, no stressful confrontations, and very little energy spent in getting kids to do things. They made it look easy.

I had to find out what was going on. If the naturals couldn't give me specifics, I would find out myself. I would study classrooms until I understood them. I would compare typical teachers with the naturals until I could explain the difference. I had just begun a new career.

#### **A Hard Look at Reality**

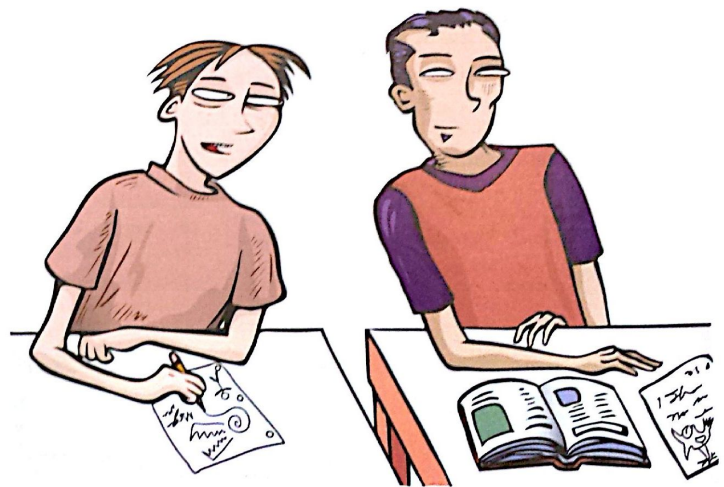
##### **Typical Classrooms**

*Tools for Teaching* is based on thousands of hours of classroom observation, state of the art research, and hundreds of mini-experiments in which procedures were tested and fine-tuned by teachers in the field. Let me telescope these observations in order to pinpoint where teachers typically have the most difficulty.

- **Squandered Time:** A typical class period is not on task until 5-7 minutes after the bell rings. It is called "settling in." Students hand in their homework, sharpen pencils, and get out their materials as the teacher takes roll.

A lesson transition averages about 5 minutes in length. Students move desks, get into groups, shuffle papers, and sharpen pencils. It is break time for the students, and they are in no hurry to get back to work.

In a 50 minute class period, settling in and one lesson transition will consume a minimum of 10 minutes – 20% of learning time. If the teacher has 2 lesson tran-



*Eighty percent of the goofing off in any classroom is "talking to neighbors."*



sitions, coming and going will consume 30% of learning time.

- **Passivity:** As the teacher presents the lesson, the students sit. Perhaps, they pay attention and take notes – or not. At the secondary level lesson presentation often takes 20-30 minutes. This pattern is becoming more common at the elementary level.

Apart from being exhausting for the teacher, this pattern of "teacher active, students passive" maximizes cognitive overload to say nothing of the students' restlessness and inattention. Goofing off in the back of the room is rampant.

- **Goofing Off:** After the lesson presentation when the students are supposed to "work independently on today's lesson," a common pattern emerges. A handful of students sit with arms waving in the air waiting for help. They are the same students every day – the *helpless handraisers*.

The teacher services the helpless handraisers one at a time by tutoring them through the lesson that was just presented to the group. These tutoring interactions average four and a half minutes in duration with a range of 3-8 minutes.

When the teacher begins tutoring, they lose the class. In five seconds goofing off ignites. In ten seconds it spreads throughout the classroom. Eighty percent of goofing off is "talking to neighbors." Fifteen percent of goofing off is "out of seat."

The overall picture that emerges is one of massive time-wasting. Rather than being "out of control," the typical classroom is simply *inefficient* due to dawdling, passivity, and *goofing off*. Goofing off kills more learning time and generates more teacher stress than all of the "serious" disruptions that are the subject of the school discipline code.

Most of the teachers' exhaustion, apart from doing six matinees a day, comes from dealing with the *frequent, small* disruptions that characterize goofing off. It has a familiar sound.

### *Nag, Nag, Nag*

Have you ever heard teachers use the following words when dealing with everyday student misbehavior?

"All right class, there is absolutely *no excuse* for all of this *talking!* When I look up, I expect to see people *working!* There is an assignment on the board, and we have ten minutes until the bell rings, so let's get something *done!*"

or

"Where are you going? Would you please *take your seat?* I am sick and tired of looking up only to see you wandering aimlessly around the room!"

or

"What are you *playing with?* Let me have that! You may have this back at the end of the period. Right now, would you please turn around in your seat, put your feet on the floor, and get to work?"

The most  
widespread  
management  
procedure in  
real classrooms is  
nag, nag, nag.

I have just given three examples of the most widespread behavior management procedure in education – *Nag, nag, nag*. No job is more perfectly suited to making a *nag* out of an idealistic young person than trying to get a room full of kids to do one thing after another all day long.

No one wants to nag. Rather, it creeps up on you.

### The Stages We All Go Through

If *talking to neighbors* will be your most common classroom disruption, the logical question of classroom management is, “*What are you going to do about it?*” Answering this question over and over all day long is something we were not prepared to do when we entered the teaching profession. Instead, we must figure out for ourselves.

We all progress through the same learning curve. It is one of the main reasons that our first year of teaching is so exhausting. We pass through four predictable stages.

#### Stage 1: As Green as Grass

Imagine that it is the first day of your teaching career. As the saying goes, you are *as green as grass*.

It is the undying hope of the green teacher that if you just love your students and are nice to them, they will be nice to you and everything will turn out fine. This is the sweet dream of the uninitiated. It will get a smile from your more experienced colleagues.

You are, however, crystal clear about what you are *not* going to do.

“I am not going to *nag* my students. I *hate* it when teachers do that!”

Thus, with a smile on your face and love in your heart, the ball game begins. Five minutes into the first lesson you look up to see two kids on the far side of the room *talking* instead of paying attention. Can you *believe* it?

Green teachers, not wanting to nag, say to themselves:

“I’ll just ignore that problem for now. Maybe the students will get back to work.”

You may even remember the words of some professor who extolled the use of *extinction* in the classroom.

“Ignore the problem behavior while it is occurring and systematically reinforce competing appropriate behavior as soon as it occurs. *Catch them being good.*”

So you ignore the talking for the moment. The students, naturally, keep talking. Unfortunately, the rest of the class can see this, and they can certainly see that you are doing nothing about it. Not surprisingly, they conclude, “*If they can talk, so can I.*”

Soon the noise level rises. Suddenly two students are out of their seats and wandering around the room.

You are losing control of the class! You say to yourself, “*I have to do something!*” We will refer to this realization as *losing your innocence*.

But do what? In all of your teacher training you were never prepared for this moment.

#### Stage 2: Do Something!

You bag extinction. You swing into action. You stand, turn toward the offending students and say their names.

“Tyrone. Roberta.”

They respond with that familiar look of mild surprise and total innocence. We will call it “smiley face.” Green teachers often mistake smiley face for repentance.

You watch and wait, looking your most serious. Tyrone and Roberta seem to get back to work. You return to helping your student. What do you think Tyrone and Roberta will be doing ten seconds from now?



If you say their names *again*, you may be able to observe the various stages of *pseudo-compliance* – the basic “fake-out moves” that all students master. In order, they are:

- **Smiley face:** They give you the look of the repentant angel, as if asking, “Who, me?”
- **Book posing:** They open their books and look back at you as though to ask, “Does this fulfill the requirements of formal education?”
- **Pencil posing:** They get out a pencil and touch it to paper before looking back at you as though to say, “Look, I’m writing.”
- **Pseudo-scholarship:** They start to write with furrowed brow, but look up periodically to see if you are still tracking their behavior.

It certainly looks like compliance from where you stand. But when you turn away from the disruptors, Tyrone and Roberta resume their conversation.

How many times will you endure pseudo-compliance before it finally gets under your skin? When you find yourself getting *upset* by the disruption on the far side of the room, you have entered phase three of your apprenticeship: *Sick and Tired!*

### Stage 3: Sick and Tired

The students know when you have finally become *sick and tired*. That is when the *serious* nagging begins.

You turn with a look of grim determination. You put your hands on your hips, grit your teeth, cock your head forward, raise an eyebrow, and draw in a breath before saying the students’ names – but with an *edge* on your voice:

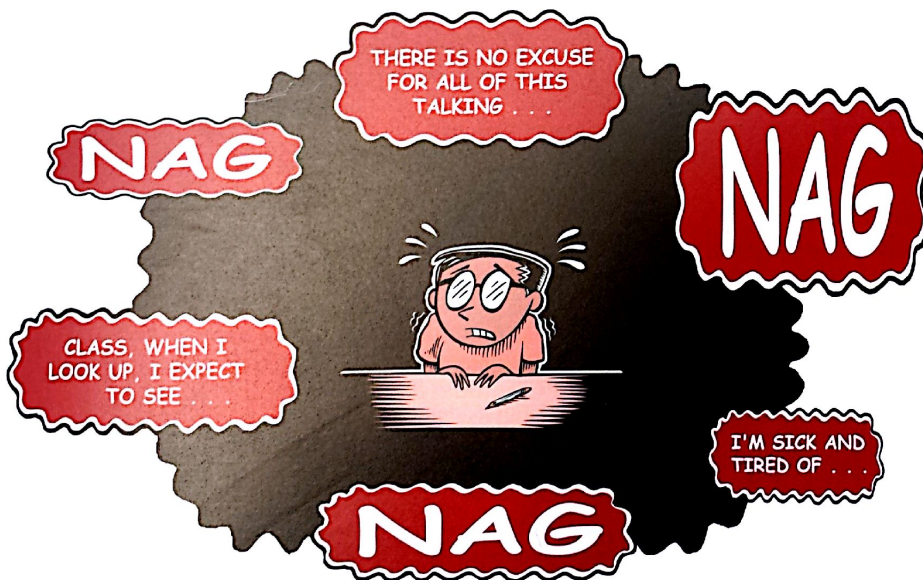
“Tyrone! Roberta!”

It sounds as though something *heavy* is finally coming down. But what? You still have no clear strategy.

When forced to say *something* when we really don’t know what to say, we are very likely to engage in a unique form of nagging known as *silly talk*. The following examples recount some of the silly things that teachers say in the heat of the moment.

“Roberta, what are you supposed to be doing?” (Students know what they are supposed to be doing.)

“Roberta, this is the second time I’ve had to talk to you.” (They are keeping count.)



"Roberta, am I going to have to come over there?" (They know you don't want to.)

Once again the students' conversation resumes as soon as you turn away. How long must you put up with this foolishness before *enough is enough*? This brings you to phase four: *Laying Down the Law*!

#### Stage 4: Laying Down the Law

You stand slowly, square up with your best *sick and tired* look and march over to Tyrone and Roberta. It is time to deal with this nonsense *once and for all*. In so doing, you pull half of the class off task as all eyes follow you. After you arrive, you get to have a *silly conversation*.

"I am sick and tired of looking up to see nothing but talking over here."

"Okay."

"I expect to see some work being done on these papers. Do you understand?"

"Okay."

"And, when I come back over here, I want to see something accomplished."

"Okay."

"All right then."

Having taken a firm stand for all that is right and good, you trudge back across the classroom with all eyes following. With one last sick and tired look at Tyrone and



*How long must you put up with this foolishness before "enough is enough"?*

Roberta, you resume helping the poor student who has been patiently waiting. What do you think Tyrone and Roberta will be doing in twenty seconds?

### Getting Nowhere

#### *Right Back Where You Started*

When you look up to see Tyrone and Roberta talking again, it will no doubt dawn on you that *you are right back where you started*. After you repeat this melodrama several times, you may eventually "throw in the towel." Two basic patterns emerge:

- **Save the trip and just nag:** There is a certain logic to support this move. If you are going to fail, fail cheap. The trip across the room is a lot of work for nothing. No doubt this is why nagging is the most widespread discipline management technique in education.
- **Give up:** When a teacher finally decides to just give up, they usually announce it in the teachers' lounge with a self-justifying pronouncement. I will call it the "Policeman Speech."

"I did not go into teaching to be a *policeman*. I am not going to spend all of my time and energy dealing with one little disruption after another all day long. I will certainly deal with situations in which a student is way out of line, but I am *not* going to stop my lesson every thirty seconds for chit-chat on the far side of the room. Blah, blah, blah."



Both of these responses belong to well-intentioned teachers who have been defeated. They have finally accepted the fact that they cannot win.

Look at the cost-benefit ratio. It costs you an arm and a leg to stop what you are doing and deal with each example of "goofing off." The students, on the other hand, have only to face forward in their seats *temporarily* in order to be in compliance. It is hard for you and easy for them.

#### ***Waiting You Out***

If you think that you can bring "law and order" to the frontier by chasing each little bandit all over the territory, let me remind you of some realities that might bring a note of sobriety to your calculations.

- There are many of them, and only one of you.
- You are older, and you tire more easily.
- They send in "fresh troops" every year.

Being calculating by nature, students know that you will wear out before they do. Some students even seem to be entertained by watching it happen.

Any time that you are working harder at discipline management than the students, you will eventually lose. They simply will wait you out and then resume their normal classroom social life.

#### ***Dying by Inches***

Going through the four stages of the learning curve like previous generations of teachers will cause you to get old and tired before your time. You are not only working too hard, but you are also dying by inches.

When you are dying, it is sort of interesting to see how close you are to being dead. Inquiring minds want to know. The following stages represent a well-worn path from frustration to "throwing in the towel."

**Exhaustion** – You are constantly dealing with discipline.

**Futility** – It doesn't get any better no matter how hard you try.

**Cynicism** – You can't do anything with these kids.

**Resentment** – It finally becomes them against you.

**Rationalization** – Here come the self-justifications.

- It's just the way kids are at this age (i.e., the hormone hypothesis favored by junior high teachers).
- It's the homes these kids come from.
- It's the television and the video games. They have the attention span of gnats.
- I don't really have any *major* problems.
- The noise doesn't really bother me *that* much.
- It's *my* job to teach. It's *their* job to learn.

#### ***Stress Management***

Teaching is a stressful job. So, part of the job is managing stress. The naturals experience a *minimum* of stress. Most of their colleagues are exhausted at the end of the day.

The bottom line in stress management is simple. You have to manage stress moment by moment, class period by class period *on the job*. You cannot allow yourself to be stressed all day long and then somehow undo it once you get home.

You can try. The usual candidates are, 1) rest – lots of luck if you have kids, 2) exercise – lots of luck if you have kids, and 3) a glass of Chardonnay. But, the damage has already been done.

We have to get smart like the naturals instead of working ourselves to death. There has to be an easier way to do this job – one that is better for *us* and better for the *kids*.