



Advantages to Managing Your Classroom

The difference between school and life? In school, you're taught a lesson and then given a test. In life, you're given a test that teaches you the lesson.

—Tom Bodett

Managing your classroom is not the same as *classroom management*. Classroom management is a discipline tool. It is making sure the lesson is organized and prepared to be given to students in a timely manner, that there is not much downtime between activities, and that students are quickly redirected when they get off task. Doing these things helps to ensure that students stay focused so they do not cause discipline problems. This skill is very valuable in a teacher and is a cornerstone to an effective classroom. Managing your classroom though is something different. It is a philosophy of teaching. Managing your classroom is giving your students a task to undertake and then guiding them along the way to make sure they are producing the best work possible. The major difference in managing the classroom and the traditional classroom is when one manages the classroom, he or she is not giving students the content. The teacher is giving students the means to find and understand that content.

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A good way to compare it is how in the business world a project manager fosters a project. According to Penny Lewis (n.d.), a project manager, there are five steps to project management:

1. Planning
2. Organizing
3. Implementing
4. Controlling
5. Closeout

You can use these same steps in managing the classroom. As the teacher, you start out by planning your project. This usually is where you ask yourself the question, What is it I want my students to learn? These are what are termed the learning objectives. Many times, these will be based upon the Common Core Standards. Once this is determined, the project must be organized. Things to consider are due dates, product, audience, resources, and others. Some of this can be determined by the teacher or can be left up to the students. It all depends if there are particular skills the teacher wants students to learn. For instance, if the teacher wants students to demonstrate how to put together an electronic portfolio, the teacher would want to make that the product of the project. If not, the teacher might give the students some choice in what product they use to demonstrate what they have learned.

Another large difference between the traditional classroom and the one managed in the project management style of teaching is that the planning and organizing are the most involving for the teacher. As he or she begins to implement it to the students, the teacher turns over a majority of the responsibility to the students. This is one of the largest advantages of managing your classroom; the impetus for learning falls onto the shoulders of the student, not the teacher. This is an advantage because this is where the learner is created. As students begin to track down information, synthesize it into whatever form they need it to take, and apply it to a product that shows what they learned, this is the process of learning how to learn. Not only that; you are also empowering students to think for themselves. This confidence to learn is invaluable and will create 21st century learners. The controlling and closeout steps of project management require a different form of teaching than the traditional classroom. This is where the management aspect comes into play. What this management looks like will be discussed in far more detail in later chapters.

THE 21ST CENTURY THREE RS

What are the advantages to managing your classroom in this style? They are many direct and ancillary advantages to undertaking such a pedagogy, but let us simplify it into the three Rs. These are not your grandfather's Rs of reading, writing, and arithmetic. These are the 21st century Rs of *readiness*, *responsibility*, and *relevance*, first introduced in the book *Project-Based Learning for Gifted Students* (Stanley, 2011).

Readiness

The great thing about managing your classroom is that you are not determining the starting or ending point for a student project when it comes to their skills and content. The only starting and ending points you are providing might be related to time such as due dates. Instead, you are giving them a task to complete. At what level a student does this is determined by him. Student #1 may come to the project with a great amount of background information and skills. This student need not spend time gathering this information again. He can start the project at a much further spot than a student who does not have this background knowledge. This allows the student to go into much greater depth, exploring higher-level thinking that he can handle because of this background knowledge. Student #2 might be starting from scratch. She might spend the first part of the project learning and trying to understand the basics of the topic. Once she gets these, she might only be able to produce lower-level understanding in her product but nonetheless, she gains an enduring understanding. Even though both students worked on the same task, they were able to go to very different levels of learning based upon the readiness of the student. This prevents students from being held back as well as allows students who need more time to be able to take it. As the project manager, you would need to recognize at what point your student is entering into the process and guide and encourage them along the way to the appropriate level of learning.

The readiness allows for natural differentiation where a student can achieve at the level he or she is able to. Students are able to challenge themselves based upon their level of readiness. As the manager of this project, you may have to step in from time to time to push students to that next level if they are unable to do so on their own, but if students are motivated, they will be pushing themselves in most cases.

Responsibility

Responsibility is a big factor in turning your classroom into a project management one. How much responsibility should you be giving your students? If they are to learn, the brunt of the responsibility should be on their shoulders. This does not mean the responsibility for turning in homework or the responsibility of being good in class. This is the responsibility for learning, the responsibility of figuring out how to demonstrate what has been learned, and the responsibility of managing their time. These are lifelong skills that if a student becomes accomplished at them, he or she will find it easier to be successful in the 21st century world.

The advantage of this is that by giving students a majority of the responsibility, you are empowering them as learners. They no longer have to wait for the teacher to give them the lesson. Because they have figured out how to think and learn on their own, there are limitless possibilities. It also will help to create leaders. By giving students the responsibility, instead of waiting around for someone to tell them what to do, they will take the initiative themselves to move their project forward. And when they encounter a roadblock, they will learn the skills and coping mechanisms to overcome these. These are problem-solving skills that are highly valued in the 21st century world.

The most important benefit is that you are creating students that can think and make decisions for themselves. This gives them a huge advantage over students who are intelligent, but do not have these valuable skills.

Relevance

Relevance is paramount when teaching 21st century skills. The work students do must be relevant to the world as well as their lives. This does a couple of things. By being relevant to the world, it allows students to see the big picture and how things fit together. A lot of times, students learn content independent of one another and then have difficulty seeing how it fits together. Because of this, they are unable to apply it to real life later on when the chance presents itself. This is where the disconnect happens in the traditional classroom. If you connect what students are learning to the real world, then they can react to it accordingly when they see it. This is how 21st century workers who can think on their feet are created.

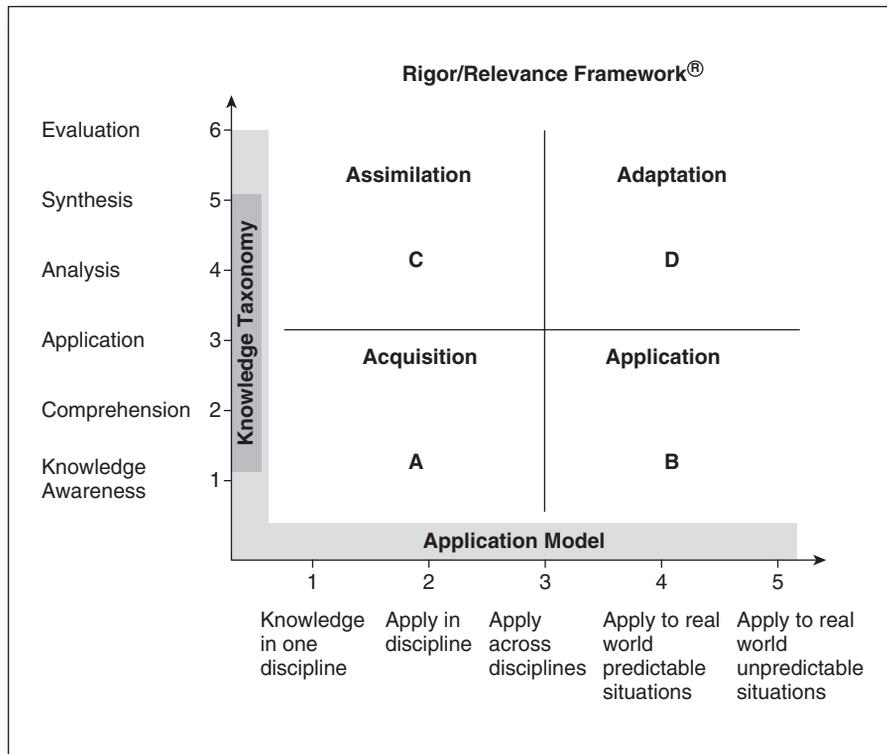
Being relevant to the student is also important. Students often ask, what does this have to do with me? Students do this not because they are self-centered or rude. It is because like most people, they do not want to have their time wasted. One way to ensure it is relevant to students is by giving them choices. Choices in how they research, what the product will

be, how they are evaluated. If students have some say so in these, they will care more about it because they are taking more ownership. In the project management style of teaching, students are given more choices.

Combining relevance with higher level thinking is how you want to set up your projects in your project management classroom. One tool to help with this is the rigor/relevance framework (see Figure 1.1) developed by the International Center for Leadership in Education (Jones, 2006).

In this framework, you are looking to get students to a higher level of thinking on the Bloom's Taxonomy shown on the Y-axis, near the evaluation level. At the same time, you want to make relevant connections to the real world so you want to be at a 5 on the X-axis where they can apply to read world unpredictable situations. Ideally speaking, you want students to be in the domain D section of the chart. In that spot students would be thinking at a higher level, while making connections to the real world. This is what managing your classroom allows you to accomplish; students

Figure 1.1 Rigor/Relevance Framework



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working on projects that require a complexity of thinking in an authentic situation that links it to the real world. And because students are responsible for a lot of the decision-making process, they can make it relevant to their own lives by choosing things they care or are passionate about. This increases their level of motivation.

OTHER ADVANTAGES TO MANAGING YOUR CLASSROOM

The advantages to managing your classroom are very similar to those encountered when using project-based learning (PBL). According to the Buck Institute on Education, these

- Integrate curriculum areas, thematic instruction, and community issues
- Encourage the development of habits of mind associated with life-long learning, civic responsibility, and personal or career success.
- Overcome the dichotomy between knowledge and thinking, helping students to both “know” and “do”
- Assess performance on content and skills using criteria similar to those in the work world, thus encouraging accountability, goal setting, and improved performance
- Engage and motivate bored or indifferent students
- Support students in learning and practicing skills in problem solving, communication, and self-management
- Create positive communication and collaborative relationships among diverse groups of students
- Meet the needs of learners with varying skill levels and learning styles (Thomas, Mergendoller, & Michaelson, 1999)

Some of these advantages have already been addressed by the three Rs, but one that was not was the ability to integrate curriculum areas. Depending on how you set your projects up, you could have students integrate content from two or more subject areas, the advantage being of course that students see how all of the parts fit together in the real world. Many times, students are doing math in math class, science in science class. Seeing how these two work together in the real world takes the skill from being a practice to being something practical.

In addition, there is the idea of being able to communicate and collaborate successfully with others in a diverse group. Since you will be managing students in teams in a lot of cases, being able to work with others is a

very important skill students will learn. This will translate into a valuable commodity for them in the professional world. How to foster these skills of communication and collaboration will be talked about at great length later in this book.

At Least Manage This

There is a lot to take in with regard to managing your classroom. At the end of each chapter, there will be a summary of the most important aspects of the chapter. This way, if you ever need to refresh your memory on how to manage your classroom, you can look back at this part as a trigger to do so.

Probably the biggest advantage that managing your classroom provides is that it creates 21st century thinkers. Thinkers are what the business world is looking for in a prospective employee. Empowering your students to make decisions and think for themselves will be a huge advantage for them when they are competing for positions in the global market.