

## 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. Over 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 Learning**

#### ***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.



*You are on your toes all day long until the bell rings.*



*Then, you keep working into the evening.*

When exasperation mounts, we swing into action. At such times, we sound like a recording of every teacher we ever had.

“Robert, would you please stop talking and get some work done?”

“Sandra, I am sick and tired of looking up to find you out of your seat.”

“What are you two playing with? Let me see that.”

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

How do you get a classroom full of students to do what you want them to do 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*.

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 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 leaped 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. 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. I knew all about group process, group dynamics, group communication, group problem-solving. I did not see a *group*.

Then, he 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 talking louder than any of the students?

“Class, there is absolutely no excuse for all of this noise!”

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, no one looked up. The students worked on a math assignment for about twenty 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 could not do that on the best day of their lives, I was thoroughly impressed. Throughout the



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

## Good Instincts

The natural teachers had no technology of management. They had good instincts.

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 the 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 discipline 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 daily for the remainder of the week, hoping to discover the secret. All that I saw were two “old pros” making it look easy.

### *They Didn’t Have a Clue*

These two exceptional teachers could not have been more generous in their efforts to help me understand

their teaching methods. Unfortunately, they did not help very much.

They both said, “You have to mean business.”

I said, “Right! What does that mean?”

They said, “Well, on the first day of school, the classroom will either belong to you or it will belong to them.”

I said, “Right! What do you do?”

They said, “Frankly, a lot of it has to do with expectations. If you do not expect them 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 the value of learning that you impart to the students.”

I said, “*Wait!* Give me credit for good values and good 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. What do I do?”

“Oh, yes,” they said. “I see. Hmmmm. 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*.

### *Common Sense*

My best explanation for the inability of natural teachers to explain their management skills is that they learned them from their *parents*. Before they even went to kindergarten, these teachers had been on the receiving end of effective management thousands of times as their parents taught them to come to the dinner table, pick up their toys, share, and take turns.

But, early childhood learning is not accompanied by a descriptive language. Rather, natural teachers describe it as “common sense.” In later life we will call this learning *instinct*.

The down side of instinct is that natural teachers have no way of passing their expertise on to the next generation of teachers. There is no terminology, no scope and sequence of skills, no task analysis.

The lesson to be learned from this is clear. Choose your parents very carefully. They are your primary “methods course.”

### **Making Management Affordable**

#### *Management Can Be Expensive*

I very much wanted to understand how these natural teachers could get so much good behavior from problem students. I especially wanted to know how they did it without working themselves to death.

At that time, we at the university were in the throes of the “behavior modification revolution.” We had learned that consequences govern the rate of behavior, and we were setting up contingency management programs for every behavior problem in the classroom from acting out to social isolation.

The real problem, from my perspective, was *cost*. We were designing individualized management programs for students with problems such as aggression, social isolation, and oppositionalism. Each program was custom-built

and required conferences after school, 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 teachers who were using one of my “B-Mod” programs had to spend between 30 and 45 minutes a day just to implement it.

To my mind these apparent classroom successes were, in fact, thoroughly impractical. We had just consumed the teacher’s planning period to solve one behavior problem. The teacher had a dozen other problems in the same classroom that were just as serious.

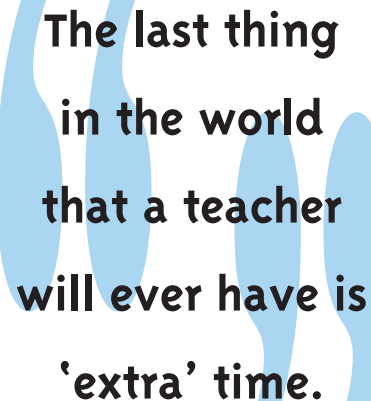
#### *A Teacher Perspective on Cost*

I came from a family of teachers – my mother, sister, aunts, great aunts, and many cousins. When we get together, it is like a staff development conference.

Growing up in such a family, I absorbed certain lessons about the teaching profession without anyone ever having to explain them to me. Prominent among them are:

- Teachers work twice as hard as the general public ever imagines.
- 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



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teacher extra time for planning or record keeping, I could forget it. If a system of classroom management is to truly help the teacher, it must *save* time. It must make your life easier.

### *The Naturals Make It Look Easy*

How do the natural teachers manage an entire classroom while making it look easy? I decided to hang out in these classrooms until I figured it out. Little did I know that this was the beginning of a new career.

Yogi Berra once said, “You can see a lot by looking.” So, I looked. I couldn’t see a thing. What does Yogi know about classrooms? I was driven to desperation.

When you watch a natural at work, do not expect to see a big show. Effective management is, for the most part, invisible.

You will certainly not see most of the things we associate with classroom management in our memories of school. You will not see much rule enforcement. You will not hear nagging. You will not see students singled out.

Since effective management is hard to see, we tend to invent a mythology about the skills of these natural teachers. Maybe they are born with it – as though there are genes for classroom management. Maybe it is magic. Who knows?

### *Making Method Out of Magic*

Over a period of two decades, I worked continuously with classroom teachers in every imaginable setting. Whatever they were most concerned with in their class-

rooms became my research agenda. A succession of natural teachers, excellent graduate students, my wife Jo Lynne, and I spent many an afternoon brainstorming following a day of classroom observation.

We would focus on a problem, and we would experiment until we solved it. Yet, whenever we solved a problem, our teachers would say, “That really helps. But, my main problem now is ...” And, off we would go on our next project.

We did our share of formal research and publication, but for every article there were dozens of little experiments that delineated the fine points of practice. We learned more from the natural teachers than we ever taught them. But, over the course of decades, we developed a knowledge of classroom management that far exceeded the practices of any single teacher.

Over the years, enough problems were solved to enable us to discern the outlines of the puzzle of classroom management. The puzzle is complex, but it is not overwhelming. This book contains the pieces of that puzzle.

## Beyond The Naturals

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Yet, over the course of decades we developed a knowledge of classroom management that far exceeds the practices of any single teacher.