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# Preface

*Mrs. Randall's day went from bad to worse five minutes into the first class of the day. She had spent much of the night awake and had subsequently slept through her alarm. Having arrived to school late, she was not totally prepared for the thirty seventh graders in her first period class. The kids were more wound up than usual, and at the five-minute mark, Eddie stepped hard on her last nerve. Throwing the whiteboard eraser down on the floor, Mrs. Randall screamed, "Shut up! All of you just shut up!" The students did stop talking, but she quickly realized she had made a major mistake. The shock on their faces soon turned to sullen resentment, and their body language showed everything from amazement to embarrassment, and even disgust. Mrs. Randall realized that in the space of a few seconds, she had perhaps significantly damaged relationships she had spent the last months working to build. It was an expensive misstep, one that could carry a heavy price.*

*Mrs. Randall calmed down, took a couple of deep breaths, apologized to the entire class for her outburst, and reminded them that such loss of control is not professional and not the kind of behavior she expected from herself or from her students. After class, she had a short conversation with Eddie about his behavior. She even took the step of explaining to her subsequent classes how she had lost her temper and discussing with them how damaging such loss of control can be on the classroom environment.*

**O**ur fictional Mrs. Randall is a good teacher—one who prides herself on her ability to remain calm in the face of adversity. Having made what she recognized could be a costly error, she worked to repair the damage and get things back to normal. She even involved her classes in a reflective conversation about just how

expensive such outbursts can be. They discussed how such behavior on the part of a teacher can get students quiet in the short run—but at an unacceptably high cost that most certainly could involve a diminution of trust. She and her students learned something from the experience and moved on.

In *Tools for Teaching*, Fred Jones (2007) encourages teachers to always “keep it cheap.” In saying this, Jones is not talking about money, but about the fact that there are moments when we can save time and effort yet achieve the same end. Why, for example, go all the way across a classroom to get a student to quit disrupting others when a meaningful look from a distance will get the job done (p. 198)? Simply “looking the student back to work” involves less time and effort than walking across the room—yet it gets the same results. The walk is unnecessary if the look will suffice. Few things are more precious to teachers than time, and time is one of many things related to teaching that can either be squandered or wisely spent.

Teachers who lecture for the greater part of a class period may find that it helps cover the curriculum in the short haul, but in the end this coverage comes at the expense of student engagement and understanding. According to Feinstein (2004), while lecture “can be an efficient way to deliver instruction,” it lacks an emotional connection to students (p. 19). Most kids (and adults for that matter) neither enjoy nor learn better while sitting still and listening to a teacher or college instructor talk for long periods of time. Most educators have observed what Hannaford (2005) calls “the glazed eyes and vacant stares of students in a lecture hall or classroom” (p. 54). Yet lecture continues to be a popular instructional delivery method, especially at the secondary and college level.

My experience has been that students in the middle and upper grades have developed a marvelous ability to “play the game.” By that I mean that they will look at the teacher and smile several minutes into a lecture, when in fact they punched out long ago and may well be engaged in mental activities totally unrelated to the curriculum. In my first two years of teaching, I totally misread those smiles. Because I wanted to think it was true, I believed the smiles meant the students were with me. I often tested that thinking by asking, periodically, whether they had any questions. Usually, there were no questions, and I assumed that my students were processing as I lectured and that they understood every word and concept. It never occurred to me that, mentally, they had gone to another place entirely and that, for the most part, I was having a great discussion with myself. Clearly, I was not engaging my students. My lectures,

while well-meaning, were far too expensive *because they gave me (and them) little in the way of a return on my investment.*

These three situations—losing one's temper in front of students, crossing a crowded room to intervene with a student, and lecturing almost exclusively as a way of covering the content—are examples of investing too much to get too little in return. At best, little is accomplished in each case. At worst, the effects of such actions can be academically harmful and, as in the case of our Mrs. Randall, can damage personal relationships and create an unsafe classroom environment. Let's look at each of the three situations with an eye toward investing much less (keeping it cheap) and getting a much greater return on our investment. If time is of the essence and if, therefore, every minute in class should be used wisely, how could each of these negatives be turned into a positive?

In the case of Mrs. Randall, had she just taken a couple of deep breaths before doing or saying anything, she could no doubt have handled the situation much differently. Had she, for example, simply raised her right hand (her regular signal for getting the attention of her seventh graders), in all likelihood the students would have responded positively *and she would not have had to say anything at all.* Simply raising her hand would have helped her keep it cheap. At the very least, a teacher who loses her temper creates a climate of fear in the classroom. Also, students who perceive this loss of control as outright aggression may react in an aggressive manner, making a bad situation much worse (Bailey, 2000, p. 106).

As for lecture, if it is used effectively—that is, if short periods of teacher talk are followed by time for student processing—then understanding will be served and students will be far more likely to remember what they processed. Jensen (2005) affirms that providing “time to discuss in pairs or small groups the relevance of new information” assists in the construction of meaning for students (p. 12). If lengthy lectures and a lack of in-class processing of new information result in little understanding and retention, it is too expensive. In classrooms dominated by lecture and teacher talk, teachers do too much of the work while students do too little.

After nearly four decades in education, I have come to the conclusion that—in the most successful classrooms—the *kids* do most of the work and the teachers facilitate process. The teachers in these classrooms provide frequent and meaningful feedback, shift the work load to the students, and ask more questions than they attempt to answer; *by doing all these things, they keep it cheap.* In the least successful classrooms, the teachers do most of the work and get little

return on their investment. These less-successful teachers spend large amounts of classroom time lecturing, explaining, reminding, cajoling, and reacting (often badly) to disruptive students. My experience has been that, sooner or later, these teachers become victims of their own expensive and often debilitating mistakes. As the mistakes and the resulting expenditures pile up, teachers begin to rethink their commitment to teaching, and students begin to rethink their commitment to learning.

How many teachers simply decide the price is too steep? How many teachers go it alone, without a mentor and with little support, until it just becomes too much to bear? How many, at a relatively young age, turn in the keys to their classroom and simply walk away from teaching? This is not, as the saying goes, rocket science. A teacher who is fundamentally unhappy and does not look forward to coming to school every day will find the cost of doing business in the schoolhouse too expensive. By the same token, a student who is fundamentally unhappy and does not look forward to coming to school every day will find the cost of doing business in the classroom too expensive—he or she will just shut down and, perhaps along with the teacher, become yet another casualty.

Wise investments can be frontloaded in terms of establishing smooth-running processes and creating “an emotionally safe school climate” (Bluestein, 2001, p. 12). Teachers who spend the first week of school on basic classroom procedures (e.g., transitions, working effectively in pairs and teams, and using time efficiently) will be able to keep it cheap the rest of the year. Wong and Wong (2005) affirm that students, especially those who come from dysfunctional home environments, need “something familiar and secure that they can rely on” (p. 191). Just as early monetary investments ensure a comfortable retirement income, early investments in the area of efficient processes and relationship building will pay off all year long for teachers and students alike. Investing up front allows teachers to keep it cheap in the classroom when every minute—and every action—counts. Investing up front in the basics and then sidestepping costly mistakes along the way will help teachers facilitate process and progress in the classroom. This thoughtful investment of time and effort may also serve to keep teachers from becoming victims of burnout, something that leads many to simply pack it all in and leave the teaching profession.

I make no claim that classrooms can be transformed into perfect places, yet it is my belief that teachers can and should enjoy teaching and that students can and should enjoy learning. When this is the case, classrooms can be wonderful and exciting places.

In the Prologue, we met Trey, a new teacher who experienced a great deal of frustration during his first year in his middle school. Many of his problems resulted from a lack of meaningful support from his administration and his middle-school-team colleagues. Trey's teacher mentor told Trey to call him if he had questions. The problem, of course, is that *brand new teachers may not know what questions are worth asking*. Near the end of his first year teaching, Trey began to seek out successful teachers in his school, with whom he had substantive discussions, and he began to spend time reading professional journals and books—which convinced him that a second year did not have to be as frustrating as the first. Trey discovered through his research and conversations that he had made fundamental errors that served as impediments to improvement for both himself and his students. He made a commitment to frontload his second year in such a way that he could avoid the mistakes that had proved costly the first time around.

This book explores eight components of successful classrooms. It is quite likely Trey would have been more successful had he been aware of the importance of having clear and consistent procedures and rules in place from the first day of school. Chapter 1 deals with these process-related issues. Chapter 2 follows up with another critical foundational issue: building relationships with students, parents, and members of the adult school community. An important part of building sustainable relationships is the ability to stay calm and avoid losing one's temper, and Chapter 3 is devoted to the issue of building trust by cultivating a safe classroom environment. These first three chapters are critical to creating the kind of classroom climate where teachers and students can operate and collaborate on a daily basis, free of the kind of inconsistencies and lack of trust that exist in too many classrooms.

Students want to be part of the action, and the idea of sitting day after day and month after month watching their teachers work is, not to put too fine a point on it, *not motivating, satisfying, or productive*. Chapter 4 serves to bridge the gap between process and content by demonstrating the importance of shifting the workload from teacher to student by engaging students meaningfully in the learning process. Chapter 5 tackles the important role of feedback in improving the academic performance of students. Chapter 6 extends this exploration of the nature and uses of feedback by looking at the balance between summative and formative assessment.

One of Trey's problems was the fact that his middle-school-team partners were not really interested in meeting on a regular basis, and

they were even less interested in solving problems and ramping up instructional effectiveness for the team's students. Chapter 7 focuses on the importance of collaboration in the continuous improvement process.

Relevance is often in the eye of the beholder, and the beholders show up every August or September expecting that what we as teachers want them to do in school will connect with what they are going to need after graduation. The final chapter, Chapter 8, is devoted to the critical issue of the relevance of *what* we teach in school, *how* we teach it, and *why* we teach it.

The second year of Trey's career was resuscitated, as we have seen, by his willingness to take charge and approach the coming school year with a proactive, rather than reactive, approach. Later in the book we will discover that Trey's teaching career takes a further upturn as . . . well . . . first things first.