Orchestra

Organized Chaos

Establishing Efficient Routines in your Classroom

by Katie Gustafson

Let's talk about organized chaos. UrbanDictionary.com defines it as "a situation or place that seems to be in chaos, but has an underlying organization and pattern which is evident to those involved in the situation." Virtually anyone who has worked with large groups of students will identify with this. We know that we cannot micromanage every student at every moment, so we give them specific instructions and set them to work. It may look messy to an outsider, but hopefully real work is being accomplished.

Unfortunately, we also know that there is a microscopically thin line between organized chaos and actual chaos. Here is an example: when students are warming up before the start of an orchestra rehearsal, the room is often noisy and busy. People are entering and leaving; chairs and stands are being moved; students are unpacking their instruments; some are tuning or practicing; and others are socializing. The teacher is most likely surrounded by a gaggle of students with questions or other needs. Depending on how the teacher has set up her classroom routines, this situation could be organized chaos, or simply chaos.

The trouble with chaos is not only the stressful feeling of disorganization. It entails loss of time, potential behavior problems with students, and sometimes even safety issues. Additionally, it likes to hide in plain sight. Sometimes chaos is disguised as "a more relaxed atmosphere," in which little is accomplished, but we are less likely to recognize it as a problem.

If this reminds you of any of your own classroom situations, you may find PBIS procedures useful. PBIS stands for Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports. It is an initiative sponsored by the Federal Department of Education, and serves as a school-wide behavior paradigm in which staff members teach, model and then actively reward good behavior. PBIS has many layers of useful protocols, but here is the one that I think best applies to the orchestra classroom.

The PBIS philosophy is that classroom behaviors and routines should be taught in the same way that you would teach any curriculum content. Instead of assuming that students "should know what to do" when they come to rehearsal, teach it to them explicitly. Explain it in very specific terms, model it for them so they can see what it looks like (or sounds like, or feels like), and expect to review it often. Most importantly, PBIS encourages teachers to consciously focus on recognizing students who are doing it right, rather than those who are doing it wrong. The goal is to make five positive comments about student behavior for every correction or negative comment.

Here is how it might look in the classroom situation mentioned earlier: Mr. Teacher is frustrated by how long it takes his 7th grade orchestra class to get started each day, so he decides to start paying greater attention to student tardiness and what they do when they first come in the door. He starts his next class period by putting a to-do list for students on the front whiteboard (or smartboard). He explains that he would like them to follow a certain routine when they enter the classroom for orchestra, and begins modeling each item on the to-do list. He leaves the room, and re-enters carrying a violin. He points out that he is arriving on time and which materials he has brought with him. He sits down in a student seat, and explains how he wants them to tune their instruments immediately, and where he would like them to store their extra belongings. He acts out each item on the to-do list in great detail, cautioning them against distractions that he knows they will face. He then notes how long it took him to do each of those things, and tells students that his goal is for each student have completed their list and be ready to rehearse within five minutes of when the bell rings.

The next day, Mr. Teacher has posted the to-do list in several places around the classroom so that students can easily refer to it. He stands at the door as students enter, greeting them and thanking students for arriving on time. He walks among students as they are getting ready, complimenting those who are following expectations, and gently redirecting students who are socializing or moving too slowly. When students are ready to rehearse, he begins by celebrating the improvement from the previous day. He reteaches the parts of the routine that some students missed, and rearticulates the goal for the next day. He continues this process each day, trying to compliment as many students as possible on their progress, and privately following up with those who are struggling. Eventually the students need fewer reminders, and he shifts his focus, using this strategy to address other classroom issues.

Let me highlight a few elements of this example. First, the teacher was modeling the desired behavior so that students could see it in action and better remember it. It is easy to forget that we as teachers should first be role models, and that our students often take their cues from our behavior. Second, re-teaching is often overlooked and under valued. We would not expect students to master a skill like shifting in only one lesson, so we should not be surprised when students need a number of tries to master a routine or other classroom expectations. Third, the habit of giving students as much positive feedback as possible is both highly motivating to students, and far better for the overall tone and morale of your classroom. It is all too common for teachers to become hyper attentive to students who frequently misbehave. I myself have fallen into that trap many times, but sometimes it can make the situation worse. Making an effort to notice success more often than we notice failure is better in many ways. It gives us permission to give more attention to the students who are making a real effort, it establishes good behavior as the norm, and it makes teaching much more enjoyable.

This model could easily be adapted in many ways. You might adapt the expectations or style of delivery for students of different ages, or for private and group lessons. It could be used to address such issues as how to handle and care for school instruments, strategies for home practice, or

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concert and recital expectations.

In spite of the constant distractions, interruptions, logistics and transitions of a school day, it is possible for a teacher to create order out of the chaos. Our time with students is precious and brief. With some planning and self-discipline, it is possible for us to make our time together efficient and enjoyable.

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