



ORCHESTRA

The Power of Good Classroom Management

by Wes Myers

Every fall we have an opportunity for a fresh start. It's an exciting time to revisit the positives and negatives of last year. Did the students struggle with instrument care and maintenance? Did we fall short in quality programming for concerts? Should this year include more communication with parents? I enjoy creating a new plan of attack for the year to continue growing as a teacher, and I can think of no better target than classroom management. However, in our efforts to create a safe and secure environment, are we missing the point? When does a plan for managing a classroom move beyond serving the students and instead serve our own need to feel in control? What I am going to propose is a very fine line between management and power, but altering our perception can serve our students better in the long run.

When a teacher sets out to manage a classroom, they aim to create a place with limited disruptions to the learning process. We want an environment where a student's ability to learn is not hindered, and time on task is maximized. Creating a room like this takes a lot of planning. Students need to know solid expectations, and we can't allow students to work against the best interests of the whole classroom. There are many ways to create expectations and thousands of books to help with the process, so we won't go over them here. Find what works best for your management style, and don't be afraid to change when things aren't working.

Factors for Student Success

We should consider what factors positively impact a student's ability to learn when creating a successful classroom environment for all students. Some factors, such as nutrition, sleep, and other basic needs, are out of our control. Schools have been helping students with these basic needs more and more, but it's beyond the scope of a single classroom teacher. If you do have the opportunity to help students meet their basic needs, you should do so without hesitation. It's the groundwork necessary for learning. Trying to meet those greater relational needs won't matter if a student is

not fed and cared for.

A student's success in the classroom is also impacted by the relationships they have. When they can make those connections and interact socially, students feel connected to one another. Orchestra is a team activity, and a good team starts with knowing and trusting one another. Finding ways to build relationships among your students with team building activities, ice breakers, or topical conversation is worth the time invested. Students should also feel that their teacher cares about them. Making a solid connection with students creates a relationship where they are more likely to comply and be willing to engage in harder activities. Students also handle behavior related consequences better when they know you and your motivations for handing out discipline.

Students need a safe and secure environment to learn. If your classroom is too chaotic, it will be difficult for students to engage in structured tasks. Students need to feel comfortable to be genuine. Answering questions or playing a passage requires confidence that they can be correct or have permission to fail. Beyond that, an orchestra classroom is a unique environment where we play together. The focus must be all in one place, and students have to be working together for a singular purpose.

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Balancing all these factors is a lot of work. It requires planning, flexibility, and experience. The teacher must be able to make decisions and have a certain degree of control. Still, are there some things that teachers do in service to classroom management that may not be required? Perhaps even some of our decisions work in opposition to our goal of an ideal learning environment. Here are some ways I think a classroom can be over-managed.

The first way I think teachers can hurt the classroom environment is by overvaluing the student-to-teacher dynamic. Music ensembles particularly exist in a world that requires a teacher's role as conductor. We have a great deal of power over how our

rehearsals are run and how our ensembles sound at concerts. This can make it difficult to develop authentic relationships with our students; it's almost as if a wall exists between us and them. At times we need to drop our guard. Tell a personal story, listen to a student using active listening skills, or allow them to share their own thoughts and ideas. I believe this is especially hard for young teachers. Lacking in the confidence built from years of experience, young orchestra teachers can fear losing the students' respect. It takes a great deal of confidence to know you aren't going to lose your authority when you let your guard down. Once you've taken those steps, there's a great deal of value to be found.

I have a special opportunity teaching 4th–12th grade. Getting to know my students and building relationships over many years is something special. We know one another, and our relationship is built on trust that goes both ways. It also allows me to make mistakes of my own rather than having to exist as the infallible "director." Not everyone has a position that teaches a wide age range, so don't wait to build those relationships. Students value authenticity, so take time to be a real person. Let down your guard a bit, and it will pay dividends throughout the year.

A second way I think teachers can hurt the classroom environment is by always needing full control of the classroom. This is related to the teacher-to-student dynamic but manifests in a slightly different way. Teaching in a room full of instruments capable of making noise means it's quite easy for the environment to feel chaotic. As stated earlier, students need to feel safe and secure. You may need to serve a particular student by controlling the noise in your room. However, your class might be able to handle a little more energy. Deciding where the line is drawn depends on the needs of students and your own level of comfort.

Specifically, I feel there are two moments where we can allow a little more energy to benefit our students. Many students enrolled in orchestra do so not just

to play an instrument; it's also a place to be with friends. Allowing room for conversation at the beginning or end of class can help them realize the social part of being in the group. The other moment where I've found energy is when we are working on new music. Sight reading can be a chaotic event. I used to dread sight reading days and tried to prepare myself to manage the classroom even more strictly. At one point I realized the reason why: they are trying to figure things out. The most human reaction to a problem is to try and fix it right away. While the most efficient way to rehearse a new piece is to listen and let the teacher guide the process, I wanted my students to engage with the material. Giving them thirty seconds after we fell apart to do their own work satisfied their need to work through the music and gave them valuable practice. Students grew to appreciate that approach, and they were then much more receptive to my instruction. Often when a rehearsal breaks into chaos,

I stop them, tell them to take a moment to work through it, and then I will help them from that point. I suggest giving it a try. Not every teacher will welcome the chaos, but it works for me knowing they are doing so with a purpose.

The last way I think teachers overmanage the orchestra classroom is by sticking to curriculum only. Our job is to teach students. We want them to grow as musicians, build their technique, and be able to work on increasingly difficult repertoire. However, when we insist on sticking to the plan, we miss opportunities to help our students grow as people. I love to see skilled musicians leave my orchestra program. I even have a few that have gone on to professional careers. But I am happiest when I see former students who have become lifelong musicians and good people. Don't forget to leave room for those spontaneous moments: chances to teach life lessons, build character, and shape children into good adults. I don't have a specific example

in this case, but if you leave yourself open to those little detours you'll know when the moment arrives.

As good orchestra teachers, we all want to create a positive learning environment for our students. This new school year we should all take time to think through our plans for classroom management, building our space to care for every student and setting them up for success. This time, think about leaving room for vulnerability, off-topic conversations, and even a little chaos. You might be happy with the results.

Wes Myers is the 4th–12th grade orchestra and High School Beginning Guitar teacher in Marshall, MN. In addition, he is the assistant director for marching band, jazz band, and directs the pit orchestra for the fall musical. He is also the principal bassist with the Southwest Minnesota Orchestra and a conductor of the Marshall Municipal City Band. †