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# Creating a Productive ELA Classroom Environment

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A preservice teacher, Caroline Schack has observed five cooperating teachers over three and a half years of clinical observations. Each educator handled creating and maintaining a productive classroom environment differently; some teachers took a more hands-off approach (which often created an inconsistent and counter-productive environment), while others structured the class physically and procedurally around productivity (which fostered a healthy environment for students to productively learn). In his first year of teaching high school English, Hagan Wells discovered quickly the importance of the learning environment. After working as a long-term substitute for a semester, he was hired and excited to have his own classes. While the room itself was well organized and decorated to be inviting and welcoming, he learned that one of the most important aspects of the environment was keeping students focused and engaged. Finally, when Andy Pickle started his position as a creative writing teacher in early January, the class was in a state of disarray. The previous teacher left in October, due to a medical emergency, and the class had been taught by a multitude of substitute teachers until winter break. As a result, students perceived this class as “a write off,” requiring no engagement or effort. Pickle sought to help students understand the class’s purpose: to supplement lost writing skills throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and to prepare for future writing tasks.

Even though our teaching situations as practicing and pre-service teachers are vastly different, we each discovered that our

common goal as educators is to promote students’ intellectual and socioemotional growth. Through implementing strategies, such as writing process pedagogy, flipped classrooms, and restorative practices, teachers can revive student productivity in the ELA classroom and significantly improve interactions within the learning environment.

## **Focusing on the Writing Process**

Throughout her clinical experiences, Schack observed different teachers with unique approaches to writing. However, she frequently noticed an all too familiar lack of productivity during writing assignments. Several cooperating teachers only assigned high-stakes writing assignments and often received lower-quality papers from reluctant student writers. One reason students develop unproductive writing habits stems from the weight of large writing assignments and whether educators pay more attention to the final product or the student’s writing process (Anson 217). Because of the pressure of a large grade, students seemed unwilling to try new writing strategies, so they did not have the opportunity to develop their writing skills and style.

In contrast, one of her cooperating teachers frequently assigned smaller, low-stakes writing assignments designed to encourage students to focus on their writing skills. During these assignments, Schack circled the room as the students wrote. She saw that students showed more enthusiasm and engagement in their work. The students enjoyed these assignments because they

could easily experiment with different methods of writing without worrying about their grade; this experimentation allowed students to figure out what writing methods work best for them, which significantly improved the quality of their writing.

The second cooperating teacher Schack describes teaches with writing process pedagogy. Essentially, privileging the writing process fosters productivity by encouraging students to pay closer attention to the way they write rather than the quality of their final product. This shift in focus helps students become stronger writers because they concentrate more on learning and less on their work's quality or their teacher's reaction to their work (Anson 216). Even though students worry less about quality, writing process pedagogy does not necessarily lower student writing quality; it changes how the whole classroom approaches writing. When teachers use writing process pedagogy, instruction is centered on student growth. Conversely, when teachers emphasize the weight of the final product, they risk teaching students that the final product is more important than the skills the students develop through completing assignments.

Writing process pedagogy also guides students towards discovering different writing strategies. Teachers using writing process pedagogy often provide students with opportunities, such as peer reviews, to see how their peers write (Anson 224). Teachers can also encourage productivity by assigning daily writing prompts, reviewing different prewriting strategies, and guiding students through customizing their writing methods. All of these methods of implementing writing process pedagogy provide students with small opportunities to increase their autonomy; eventually, students may develop strong independent

learning skills and be able to try more productive, autodidactic learning techniques such as flipped instruction.

### **Flipping Classrooms**

Merging classroom management strategies with cultivating ELA skills helps produce an optimal classroom environment tailored to help students succeed in English. One such blending of classroom management with ELA instruction occurs in a flipped classroom model to improve students' performance and interest in writing. In "Investing the Flipped Classroom Model in a High School Writing Course: Action Research to Impact Student Writing Achievement and Engagement," Elizabeth Ann Florence and Tammi Kolski examine how this modern approach to instruction could be implemented effectively to impact the quality of students' writing. Defined as "instruction requires students to access the initial content or lecture at home while completing hands-on, interactive activities at school," the students enjoyed working at their own pace with the material outside of class and demonstrated stronger proficiency in the writing skills they were learning through the flipped model (Florence and Kolski 1042).

The utilization of a flipped classroom model not only makes students more productive and take ownership of their learning, but it opens the door for ELA teachers to be more hands-on with students and allows for students to collaborate in a deeper, more meaningful way. Wells first incorporated this approach in their journalism class. During their introductory unit for news writing, Wells posted the Google Slides presentation with commentary to Google Classroom and instructed students to go through the presentation and take notes on it before

coming to class. This allowed his students to spend class time analyzing examples of good news writing along with extending workshop time for students to write their own news stories and get feedback from their peers. The majority of end products from this unit earned higher grades than the following news writing unit that used more classroom lectures, a traditional instructional delivery model. As a first-year teacher, this successful use of a newer classroom management strategy not only allowed Wells to make his writing instruction more beneficial for students, but also showed him that educators must be willing to adapt with the changes in technology and society to get students back on board and engaged.

### **Restoring Productivity**

Just as educators must be willing to adapt with technology, we must be willing to adapt to utilize new forms of classroom management. Classroom management (or a lack thereof) can be one of the largest contributors to productive or wasted instructional time, as well as barriers to productive learning. While the simplest answer for many teachers is to remove the “problem” student, this is counterproductive to what we actually want to accomplish. Removing the student from the classroom is the last solution educators should pursue because it reduces instructional time. Instead, implementing “restorative practices” encourages students to reflect metacognitively on instructional opportunities, while stressing empathy and understanding.

“Restorative practices” are rooted in “restorative justice, a way of looking at criminal justice that focuses on repairing the harm done to people and relationships rather than on punishing offenders” (Costello, et al. 6).

In the ELA classroom, a restorative circle can be used to redirect students and reinforce classroom expectations. When initial redirection, loss of behavioral points, and calls home did not work, Pickle decided to try out the “restorative circles” strategy. When students circled up and were asked about how the actions of the few made them feel, they admitted that, rather than feeling amused as the offenders wished, they felt irritated or angry at those students because they were interrupting their time to focus and complete work. Through these conversations, students became part of the solution rather than singled out. They realized how their behaviors cause disruption in the learning environment and worked to correct their actions. “Restorative practices” like this circle can be part of daily affirmations or bellringer assignments. Through including reflective and restorative prompts (e.g.: “Think back on a time when you have hurt someone emotionally, or physically, how could you remedy this situation? Does your remedy include an apology and/or an understanding of the other person’s point of view and how they were wronged? Did your solution offer a resolution that benefited both parties?”) into everyday work and potentially larger assignments, it is possible that students can begin to see many situations wherein using restorative practices could change their perspective, allowing them a chance to grow. ELA courses, focused on reading, writing, and oral communication practices, provide the space for students to be able to learn to articulate their thoughts and feelings and produce work that reflects that newfound ability and level of understanding.

Whether a class uses writing process pedagogy, flips classrooms, or promotes self-reflective behavior, these strategies have the potential to improve productivity in

the classroom. Each of these not only put the students first, but they establish an environment that fosters self-advocacy, student autonomy, and communication. As practicing and pre-service ELA teachers, we see the effects of productive and unproductive environments every day. To give our students the best chances for success, we are invested in creating and maintaining a productive environment for students to grow. If we can help students grow socially, emotionally, and academically, then we are preparing the next generation for success.

#### Works Cited

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