

A spirit of cohesion

Rose Senior observes that even the class clown can be a positive influence.

Some years ago I began a teacher development workshop by getting teachers to brainstorm all the different classroom characters they could think of. Before I knew it the whiteboard was filled with labels such as 'the dormouse', 'the know-all', 'the persistent questioner' – and, of course, 'the class clown'. We all had a good laugh and the experience of creating and sharing labels for students brought back a flood of memories for everyone in the room.

Getting to know you

A few years ago I spent 240 hours sitting at the back of language classes and documenting what was going on. Because I observed the same classes week after week, I came to know the personalities of the students and could identify the roles that individuals played in the social lives of their classes. It became increasingly clear that each teacher had become adept at using the personalities and idiosyncrasies of individual class members to build a spirit of camaraderie and togetherness within their classes.

Using your knowledge

All the teachers I observed were similar in one respect: they all retained their authority and never lost control of their classes. They did this, not by behaving in rigid, authoritarian ways, but by focusing clearly on learning goals and ensuring that worthwhile learning occurred in every lesson.

At the same time, they showed their human side, demonstrating through their body language and general demeanour that they welcomed spontaneous student actions and words. They did not construe behaviour that more traditional teachers might consider 'forward' or 'cheeky' as a threat to their personal authority. The diagram below represents contrasting ways of reacting to spontaneous student behaviour in the classroom. The teachers I observed followed the right-hand route, indicating that they recognised the group-building potential of the kinds of unanticipated student behaviours that are part of the fabric of daily classroom life. Once it has been established that teachers welcome such behaviour, increasing numbers of

students develop leadership roles which contribute to the ongoing development and maintenance of class cohesion.

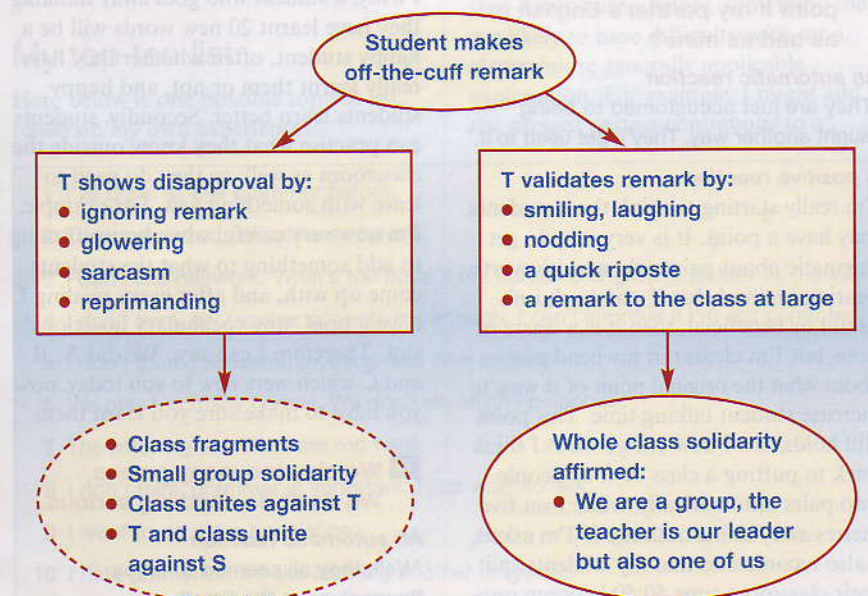
Student roles

A convenient way of classifying the roles played by students in the social development of their classes is to divide them into 'witting' and 'unwitting' roles. Witting roles are roles that students, evidently happy to be the focal point of class attention, adopt for themselves, while unwitting roles are those that somehow evolve, usually at the instigation of others, as the culture of the class becomes more clearly defined. Although logic suggests that students have more control over witting than unwitting roles, I saw ample evidence of students gradually developing ownership of unwitting roles. Once they sensed that their classroom role was recognised and valued by both the teacher and the other students, many of them showed through their body language and actions that they were happy with their assigned classroom role. They seemed to take pride in their heightened visibility: they were now personalities in the eyes of the class.

Witting roles

The helper

The most obvious group-enhancing role that students can play is that of being helpful to the teacher in a range of practical ways. This typically demonstrates



loyalty to the teacher and an overall commitment to the success of the class.

I saw students setting up rooms, fetching and carrying books, operating the video recorder and so on. Clearly most students willingly do these tasks if asked to do so, but some will assume ownership of particular tasks by volunteering to perform them on a regular basis. A student in one class would spring up to clean the board with such alacrity that the class often laughed. He would then make exclamations such as *'My job!'* or give a broad smile and a little bow. The teacher was so convinced of his group-building capacity that, when learning that he would remain in her class for a further term, she commented, *'With Alex coming in I knew I'd have a good class.'*

The artist

Certain students have particular skills that they are prepared to demonstrate in front of their classes.

One student with artistic talent was regularly called upon by his teacher to draw things on the board. As the course progressed, this student began doing drawings on the board during breaktime, so that when the class returned they would find a picture on the board relating to the topic being studied. When the topic was health, the class returned to the room to find a drawing of a large green apple complete with a smiling maggot emerging from a hole. The teacher's exclamations of delight and the admiring comments of the students seemed not only to boost the self-esteem of the artist, but also to affirm that a spirit of camaraderie prevailed within the room. Everyone in the class was privy to the shared knowledge that this particular student might 'lift' the class at any time by demonstrating his artistic prowess.

The assistant

Certain students may assume responsibility for helping others to learn. This might involve explaining the teacher's directives to people who are confused, willingly working with weaker class members or translating words for compatriots.

The beginners' class that I observed contained two intermediate students who, because the intermediate class was full, had to remain in the lower class. One of them sat in a corner at the front

of the class and completed all tasks quietly and independently, while the other sat in the middle of the room next to the only non-European student. She played what the teacher called a 'pivotal role' in the life of the class, relating well not only to the younger, less organised students, but also to the older, more focused ones. She moved around the room, helping others to complete tasks and would often stay with a new partner for the remainder of the session, rather than rushing back to the comfort zone of her own seat as soon as she could.

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The comic

Certain students can develop into class personalities by focusing attention on their own personal attributes or limitations.

In one class, a large lady made repeated jokes about her size. In another, I saw a good example of the class clown, the student who regularly gets things wrong and then plays the fool. In this case it was a student who hit himself on the head and exclaimed *'Stupid Marco!'* whenever he made an obvious mistake. Such students may of course be motivated more by a desire to save face than by a desire to create class cohesion.

In several classes, I observed the phenomenon of individual students developing bantering relationships with their teachers. Confident students even ventured to tease their teacher. When one teacher returned late to class after the morning recess, a student mimicked the teacher's usual words and called out laughingly, *'Oh dear, late again!'*

As the courses progressed, bursts of laughter in some classes became increasingly frequent and seemed to affirm that a spirit of cohesion prevailed. In such classes even low-profile students might eventually try their hand at being humorous. This could involve anything from making a one-word quip such as

'Lunchtime!' in response to the teacher's request for a mid-morning time-check, to telling a full-length humorous story from their own culture. Attempts such as these demonstrated willingness on the part of low-key students to contribute to the ongoing maintenance of class cohesion. It was as if they had been pulled along by the power of the class group.

Unwitting roles

Clearly teachers are moving into uncharted territory when they try to nudge low-profile students into playing more active roles in the social development of their classes. How do such students react to being foregrounded by their teachers?

Nicknames

Several teachers that I observed focused on the names, clothes, habits or interests of individual students as a way of making them more visible to their classes at large. Some created nicknames for students, such as *'Señor Incognito'* for the Colombian who always wore sunglasses in class, or *'Mr Mobile'* for the student who often forgot to switch off his mobile phone.

Others focused on clothing, such as Pedro with his predilection for pink socks. Personal fetishes could be referred to, such as Anita and her long painted fingernails, which generated teacher remarks such as, *'Hello, Anita! What colour are your nails today?'* or *'Anita's late today. She must be at home painting her nails.'* Some students had sporting or personal interests that, once known by the class at large, could be regularly referred to in such a way that a spirit of friendly intimacy within the class was affirmed. The teacher might say, for example, *'Ah, Dodi is going to be playing tennis tonight; I can see his racket in his bag'* or *'Yasmin, did you see that program on dolphins last night?'* (knowing that Yasmin had a passion for dolphins).

Students reacted in different ways to being foregrounded by their teachers. Some were evidently pleased, such as the Taiwanese student called Clark who reminded the class of his nickname at regular intervals throughout the course (having been dubbed *'Superman'* by his teacher on the first day). Others, however, seemed to find class attention an embarrassment, or resented having

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clichéd views of themselves perpetuated. The teachers nearly always sensed when it was necessary to pull back, such as the teacher who realised that it would be inappropriate to repeat the joking comment that Korean students were accident-prone (made because several Korean students in the school had recently had minor car accidents).

Leadership

My observations provided clear evidence of certain students modifying 'difficult' behaviour when subtly allocated leadership roles within their classes. Whenever she sensed discontent, one teacher would quickly find the student in question a high-profile task. This might involve writing instructions on the board, giving a dictation to the class or playing the key character in a roleplay. Once students with higher-than-average language skills and/or particularly strong personalities were given the opportunity to demonstrate their skills, they often quietened down and sometimes became their teacher's staunchest ally in the group maintenance process.

Humour

Finally, students often found themselves unwittingly contributing to class cohesion when they made unintentionally funny comments that engendered bursts of whole-class laughter. These could include incorrect responses to teacher questions (such as, 'How are you today?' 'Good morning.'). decontextualised sentences which clearly contradicted reality (such as, 'I am 64 and I am retiring next year.'). or behaviour that was particularly out of character. In classes in which a spirit of cohesion prevailed, students needed only the smallest of stimuli to break into laughter. Those who were the unwitting causes of these outbursts of laughter, although they might initially look perplexed, were usually swept along by the prevailing mood of the moment and laughed along with everyone else. However, they may not have been feeling as comfortable as they looked.

Here are 12 practical hints for encouraging students to play more active roles in the development of class cohesion.

- 1 **Do** not behave like a dragon in your classroom.
- 2 **Do** keep your class focused on learning goals (in this way you won't lose control).
- 3 **Do** encourage a degree of spontaneous student interaction in the early days of your class (for example in a warm-up activity).
- 4 **Do** identify which individuals in the class are most likely to contribute positively to the development of class cohesion.
- 5 **Do** establish a point of contact with such students and use your relationship with them to model appropriate classroom behaviour.
- 6 **Do** behave in an open and friendly way towards the whole class once you have established a rapport with key individuals so that others will be encouraged to follow suit.
- 7 **Do** not discipline tricky students in ways that could lead them either to lose face or to feel resentful towards you.
- 8 **Do** find positive roles for tricky students (helping others, for example).
- 9 **Do** respond approvingly (with a nod, smile or a few words of praise) to the behaviour of tricky students that can be construed positively.
- 10 **Do** create opportunities for low-key students, including weak ones, to contribute to the development of class cohesion (giving them specific class tasks, for example).
- 11 **Do** respect the right of students to maintain a low profile within the class for as long as they wish to do so.
- 12 **Do** not foreground individuals any longer once you sense that they are feeling embarrassed or irritated by the attention of the class.

The teacher's role

Experienced language teachers are aware of the potential of individual students within their classes to play group-building roles. Although some were more active than others, all the teachers I observed found creative ways of encouraging the personalities of individual students to shine through in ways that encouraged the development of class cohesion. By behaving as integral members of their classes rather than as traditional authority figures, the teachers encouraged rather than suppressed individual expression. They legitimised the kinds of behaviours that more traditional teachers might interpret as a challenge to their personal authority. By so doing, they set in train the kinds of social processes that were likely to lead to the development of class cohesion.

I must, however, add a word of caution. Teachers need to sense both when it is appropriate to try to encourage more students to participate actively in the corporate life of the class

and when it is appropriate to pull back and allow individuals to operate as followers rather than leaders.



My classroom observations have revealed what we all intuitively know, that being a successful language teacher involves far more than teaching in a technically proficient way. Another aspect involves being sensitive to the social atmosphere of the class and behaving in ways that allow individual students to adopt roles that are likely to contribute positively to the development of class cohesion. **ETP**



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