High Behavioral Expectations

From The *Taxonomy of Effective Teaching Practices*

**Technique: Strong Voice**

**Strong Voice:** Some teachers have “it.” They enter a room and are instantly in command. Students who, moments before, seemed beyond the appeal of reason suddenly take their seats to await instructions. No one knows for sure what “it” is and where it comes from. Much of it is surely intangible and non-transferable, a manifestation of the unique power of individuals and their ability to earn respect and credibility, to build relationships, to exude confidence and poise. But even if I cannot bottle “it,” I can describe five concrete things that “it” teachers consistently use to signal their authority. These are five eminently “do-able” things. And they are skills that can be learned and practiced, which means that anyone with desire do them, even the seemingly meek and mildest of novices. Using them will put you in a position to establish control, command and the benign authority that makes the use of excessive consequences unnecessary. Mastering these skills may not make you the “it” teacher, but having a Strong Voice will surely get you a lot closer.

The five skills of the Strong Voice teacher are: Economy of Language, Do Not Talk Over, Refusal to Engage, Square Up/Stand Still and Quiet Power.

- **Economy of Language:** Fewer words are stronger than more. Demonstrating economy of language shows that you are prepared, that you know why you are speaking. When you need your directions followed, use the words that best focus students on what is most important and no more. Don’t dilute urgent issues with things that can wait. Avoid initiating distractions. Being chatty or verbose signals nervousness, indecision, and flippancy. It suggests that your words can be ignored. When you need to be all business, avoid any excess words. Be clear and crisp. And then stop talking.

Consider Kelli Peterson, first grade teacher at Excellence Charter School. As she kicks off a Monday morning with her all-boys class, she guides her students through a series of energetic songs (e.g. “The more you read, the more you know!”) in anticipation of reading class. Her students, who sing with her daily, know the songs and why they sing them, so Peterson doesn’t bother to explain that. She merely leans forward and sings the first four words of the first song “G, Double-O, D…. And the students chime in, “M-O-R-N-I-N-G. Good Morning! Good Morning!”

As the song comes to a close Peterson signals its end by tying an imaginary bow with her fingers and zipping her lips. Not a peep from her class. Now she cues students with a single word to start the next song. “The…” she says. And her students sing, “…more you read, the more you know!” She wraps this song with a wordless bow as well, and keeps the now energized students on task with a crisp command, “Brandon! The books please!” Then nothing else but smiling and no-nonsense eye contact as Brandon starts passing.
And they’re off, opening to page 128 at her three word command: “Page 128, please.” Peterson resists the urge to distract her first grade boys with a lot of meta-talk of the “that was very nice, now we’re going to sing another song!” variety. Her purpose is to energize then focus. There are better times to chat about their weekend. The power here is in what she doesn’t say.

- **Do Not Talk Over:** If what you’re saying is truly worth attention, then every student has the right and the responsibility to hear it. And if what you’re saying is not that important, well, maybe you shouldn’t be saying it, at least to the whole class. When you need them to be, your words must be far and away the most important in the room, so make a habit of showing that they matter. Waiting until there is no other talking, rustling, etc. before beginning. By ensuring that your voice never competes for attention you will demonstrate to students that their decision to listen isn’t situational (i.e. you do it if it seems like maybe it really matters this time).

Moreover, controlling who has “the floor” is the mark of your authority and a necessity to your teaching. If you repeat 10 instructions per day at half a minute per instruction you will waste two full days of school per child over the course of the year. You cannot afford to talk over students.

In some cases you may need to start in order to stop, that is, start a sentence and break it off to show that you will not go on until you have full attention. This use of the interrupted phrase makes the fact that you are stopping obvious but avoids the ironic necessity of talking over students to tell students you won’t talk over them.

Consider Colleen Driggs- Petite and energetic, she wears her hair in a ponytail, and always seems on the brink of a smile. As she comes to the end of a recent reading lesson she reviews with her class, “Biographies and autobiographies are stories about real people and the events that…” All of a sudden, she notices a bit of a murmur, a few students drifting. “I’m sorry, stop,” she says, pointing to her ears to emphasize the importance of listening. Breaking her thoughts mid sentence underscores how seriously she takes her words. She won’t let the issue go until the end of the sentence and throw away even a few words because her words, and the material she is reviewing, matter. Instead she says, “I need everybody slanting right now.” She backs up three steps, moving from the middle of a row of students to the front of the room, where she stands up straight and pauses for a beat to make sure students give her their full attention (and make it clear that she is watching whether they do).

As she says this, Jimmie moves his legs under his desk and gives Driggs his best eye contact. The last murmurs die out. “It has looked solid so far today, but right now your pencils need to be down. Your eyes need to be up here,” she says carefully managing the economy of her words. Mateya pushes her pencil aside and sits up straighter. Driggs now pauses another half beat for emphasis and moves behind the overhead projector. She turns it off to remove one final distraction.
With the focus of her class now complete, Driggs doesn’t waste another second. “Biographies and autobiographies are stories about real people,” she says picking up her original thought where she left it. Her words are almost exactly the same as her original statement, a fact that emphasizes the importance of the original words. They were not thrown away but delayed until they could be appreciated. The entire interruption which takes a total of 9 seconds is actually rather long by her standards. Typically she reaffirms the expectation that students won’t talk while she’s talking in 2 or three seconds, but this more intentional example underscores how much her words, and listening to them carefully, matters.

• *Do Not Engage:* Once you have set the topic of conversation, avoid engaging in other topics until you have satisfactorily resolved the topic you initiated. This is especially important when the topic is behavioral follow-through. But what does that look like and why is it important?

Of all the situations in which a student is likely to try to change topics, the moment in which you ask him or her to take accountability for his or her actions is among the most likely. Commonly a student will reply with an excuse or a distraction. Suppose, for example, that you say to David, who is pushing Margaret’s chair with his foot, “Please take your foot off of Margaret’s chair.” David might reply, “But she’s pushing me!” or “But she keeps on moving into my space!” Many teachers might struggle in such a situation by engaging the distraction David has proposed—what Margaret was allegedly doing. Saying, “Margaret, were you doing that?” or even, “I’m not really concerned with what Margaret was doing” is a way of responding to David’s choice of topic, not making him engage your. A better response would be to say, “David, I asked you to take your foot off of Margaret’s chair,” or even, “We can discuss that later. Right now I need you to follow my direction and take your foot off of Margaret’s chair.” These responses are better because they make explicit reference to the fact that you initiated a topic of conversation and expect it to be addressed and because it doesn’t require you to announce that you “don’t care” what Margaret did, which isn’t exactly the message you want to convey.

Another possible reply from David in the above situation might be, “But I wasn’t doing anything!” Again, the best strategy is not to engage his topic. After all you wouldn’t have corrected him if you’d had a question in your mind about whether David’s foot was where it should be. The best reply is, “I asked you to take your

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1 If you did have a question, an effective strategy would be to say, “David if you’re foot is on Margaret’s chair, I need you to put it under your own desk and keep it there.” If he distracts with “But she was…” your response is simple. He’s admitted that his foot is on her chair and now you merely repeat your request that he remove it. If he says, “It wasn’t on her chair,” then you can simply reply, “Good. Then it shouldn’t be hard for you to keep it under your desk for the duration of class.” If you think David’s likely to test you, you could add, “I’ll keep an eye on it so I can help you practice that at recess if you need my help.”
foot off Margaret’s desk. Once you’ve done that you don’t need to say anything more.”

Incidentally, it’s worth noting that if possible, a better original direction to David would have been to tell him where to put his foot rather than where not to put it. After all there’s no guarantee that the next place he finds for it will be much better. Or that he won’t move it back. So an ideal original command might be something like, “David please put your feet under your desk and face me.” This command also puts you in a better place if he removes his foot and claims, “But my foot wasn’t on Margaret’s chair” or “My foot isn’t on Margaret’s chair.” Because you have initiated the topic of where his foot should be rather than where it shouldn’t be, you can merely repeat your request. “I asked you to put your foot under your desk and to face me. Let me see you do that now.”

It’s important to note that while this is about your authority, it’s not only about your authority. Engaging in his topic allows David to defer consideration of his own accountability. Students will often seize upon this opportunity to convince themselves that they were not, in fact, behaving in a negative manner. Ask yourself if you want your kids to get the message that you can change the topic or blame someone else if you haven’t done your job. Ask yourself if you want them to be able to fool themselves into thinking it was all ok. Thus insisting that you control the topic of behavioral conversations ensures accountability by students in both your interest, their peers (who interests you represent) and their own.

Refusing to engage establishes a tone of focused accountability in your classroom. Students can’t change the topic. They need to “do” first and explain later. It also means that the issues of who is bugging who are more easily delayed until a time when instruction is not happening.

Here’s another useful example:

Teacher (to James, who was talking): James, you are talking. Please move your card to yellow.
James: It wasn’t me!
Teacher: Please move your card to yellow.
James: Shanice was talking! Not me!
Teacher: I asked you to move your card. Please get up and move your card to yellow.

It’s worth noting here that it may be reasonable for the teacher to discuss who was talking with James (it also may not be!), but it needs to be the expectation that the latter conversation doesn’t happen until James has first done what his teacher asked.
He can dissent. He can seek redress. Until he has obeyed the initial request, there is no other conversation.

A final situation in which it’s critical not to engage is when students call out answers. To respond sends the message that if what you call out is interesting enough—or the right answer when no one can seem to get it, or said loud enough or repeated often enough—the rules don’t apply. Doing this will very rapidly put you in a place where you are faced with constant calling out. No matter how fascinating the comment or how needed the right answer, if you engage when it is called out, you will erode your ability to control future conversations in your classroom.

- **Square Up/Stand Still:** In every comment, you speak non-verbally as well as with your words. Show with your body that you are committed to each request. When you want to express the seriousness of your directions, turn, with two feet and two shoulders, to face the object of your words directly. Make sure your eye contact is direct. Stand up straight or lean in close (ironically this shows your level of control by demonstrating that you are not shy or afraid; you don’t crouch down to a dog you fear will bite you). If the student to whom you are speaking is distant, move towards him.

When giving directions that you want followed, stop moving and don’t engage in other tasks at the same time. If you are passing out papers while you direct students, you suggest that your directions aren’t that important. After all, you’re doing other things at the same time too. At times it may even help to strike a formal pose, putting your arms behind your back to show that you take your own words seriously; that they, like you; are formal and purposeful.

One look at Robert Zimmerli, and it’s clear he means business. Even before he speaks, his straight back and direct eye-contact, are hints that he’s in control. Perhaps that’s why he’s usually smiling. When necessary, Zimmerli interrupts his energetic pacing to strike formal pose, his hands behind his back, his feet shoulder length apart, his eyes ahead. When he strikes this pose students respond immediately. He faces up and, almost reflexively, his students sit up in their chairs. Colleen Driggs employs Square Up slightly differently. In the middle of a sentence explaining how to use the word “inconsiderate” (and using her husband as the example!) she stops, points with both fingers to her eyes and says “hands down, track up here.” She holds the pose for a solid two beats, which is all it takes for her students to put down their hands and focus their attention on their teacher. Then she continues on with her questioning.

- **Quiet Power:** When you get nervous, when you are worried that students might not follow your directions, when you sense that you may not be in control of your room, your instinct is often to get louder and talk faster. When you get loud and talk fast
you *show* that you are nervous, scared, out of control. You make visible all the anxieties above and send a very clear message to students that if they can press enough buttons, they can control you—make you loud and anxious and out of control, make you put on a show that’s much more entertaining than revising a paper or nailing coordinate geometry, say. Though it runs against all your instincts, get slower and quieter when you want control. Drop your voice. Make students strain to listen. Exude poise and calm.

**Putting the Strong Voice techniques together**

In his third grade classroom Darryl Williams’ *Strong Voice* drives a clear and compelling culture. On a recent morning he demonstrated all five techniques within a sequence of just a few seconds to bring his class to order. Having completed a study of prefixes and suffixes at the board, Williams turns to explain what’s next on the agenda. “Ok,” he begins, “Let’s see who’s…” but his voice pulls up abruptly, demonstrating a refusal to talk over students. Two or three boys have their hands in the air while he is talking. Two others are talking to a classmate. Someone has their head down on the desk. “Well, most of us are doing an excellent job today,” he says, dropping his voice to just above a whisper. He puts the book he was carrying down. He turns to face the class and places his arms behind his back in a formal “Square up” pose. Quietly, slowly, firmly he says, “Please put your hands down,” focusing their attention on the request with strict economy of language. His refusal to take hands is yet another way to avoid engaging in a topic other than the one of his own choosing. The distractions are gone now. The room is silent. All eyes are on him. For Williams, though, there’s one more step—the task of making his actions transparent and benign. “Thank you,” he says, showing his appreciation for their rapid return to full attentiveness. “The reason I can’t answer all your questions right now… I would like to and I love it when you tell me intelligent things. But we don’t have a lot of time. We still need to read our story and then…” For Williams, the strength is not just in the control but in the caring. His explanation of the rationale behind his authority ensures his ability to sustain that control—with students’ buy-in, for the long haul.