



Situated Practice: A Reflection on Person-Centered Classroom Management

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This article provides a situated perspective on the person-centered classroom management practices described in this issue, in order to highlight the special contribution these practices make to sustaining meaningful student engagement in classroom activity. Building on Paul Gump's efforts to conceptualize the classroom environment, the discussion focuses especially on understanding the programs of action embedded in activities as central elements in establishing and sustaining productive classroom order. Because these action systems are jointly constructed by teachers and students, person-centered practices have enormous power for engaging students in classroom events.

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IN HER INTRODUCTION TO THIS ISSUE of *Theory Into Practice*, Walker stipulates a view of classroom management as “socially situated, humanistic practice rather than the exercise of discipline techniques.” The articles in this issue address, with compelling examples, a fundamentally humanistic approach to classroom life. This approach is grounded in the notion that positive outcomes accrue when we value the personal dignity and integrity of students (and teacher education candidates), invite them to engage through intrinsic interest, offer trustworthy advice and directives, and provide them with the resources and support necessary to achieve ends that are meaningful and fulfilling.

My task in this final article is to stand back a bit to provide a somewhat wider perspective on the person-centered classroom management practices articulated in this issue. To meet this assignment, I have chosen to underscore the term *situated* in Walker's definition of management practice. My choice reflects, in part, the growing awareness among instruction specialists that

teaching and learning are inextricably situated in concrete activity (Greeno, 2006). It is difficult, from this perspective, to fully comprehend and appraise any classroom practice, including person-centered approaches to classroom management, in isolation from a rich understanding of the settings in which these practices are carried out. A similar view can be found in efforts to scale up effective instructional models. Knowing that an approach works in a particular setting does not necessarily predict its consequences in other settings. The core issue in scaling up practices seems to be related to an understanding of how situations affect enactment (Clements, 2007).

Fortunately, in the field of classroom management we are heirs to the rich ecological legacy of Paul Gump, who devoted much of his long professional life to examining how settings influenced action (for details, see Doyle & Carter, 2005). In reviewing this legacy, I hope to show the special role that the person-centered practices highlighted in this issue can play in sustaining meaningful student engagement in classroom life.

The Classroom as Situated Activity Setting

Classrooms are complex systems of individuals and groups, curriculum and personal agendas, aspirations and affiliations. In this light, classroom management is about the distinctive properties and structures of classroom environments and the central problem in the field is “conceptualization of the environment” (Gump, 1969, p. 201).

The basic elements of an ecological approach to classrooms can be found in Gump’s (1967, 1969) landmark study of the third-grade classroom as a behavior setting. Gump constructed two full-day chronicles for each of six classrooms and used these chronicles to map the segments that made up the day in third-grade classrooms. These segments were described in terms of *milieu* (spatial enclosure and furnishing) and *program or action structure* (ways of doing things). It became clear from this analysis that the features

of these segments surrounded and regulated behavior in classrooms. Teacher action and student involvement, in other words, were seen to be situated within the particular activity unit on the floor at a particular time, and classroom order was seen as a product of the strength and stability of the program of action embedded in that activity unit.

This brief review of Gump’s classic study underscores important conceptual themes in classroom theory. The first and perhaps most important theme is *habitat*. The classroom is not simply a background or a container for teaching and learning, a neutral and synthetic space in which teachers and students happen to be. Classrooms, rather, are systems of interrelated activity segments that are tangible and powerful partners in constructing what happens in these environments. This approach makes visible the *classroom* in classroom management. What we see when we watch teachers and students going about their work is the product not solely of individual dispositions or intentions, but also of the demands of a very complex behavior setting.

By recognizing and coming to terms with the ecobehavioral realities of classrooms, it is possible to harness their power to design educative events for all students. As Roger Barker wrote in 1978: “When people understand behavior settings and learn to create and operate them, they greatly increase their power by managing the environment that has so coercive an influence over them” (as quoted in Willems, 1990, pp. 474–475).

Second, Gump’s work also underscored the central importance of *program of action* in classrooms. In his words, “The action structure is the heart of classroom segments” (Gump, 1982, p. 99). This assertion has special significance for classroom management because order itself is defined and held in place by the programs of action embedded in the activities a teacher tries to enact in a classroom. These programs of action provide slots and sequences for participants’ behavior; create direction, momentum, and energy for lessons; and pull events and participants along their course. In many respects, classroom management is about managing programs of action,

a fundamental understanding that seems to lie at the heart of expertise and creativity in teaching.

Finally, Gump's work allowed us to see *events* in classrooms rather than simply discrete behaviors, interpersonal exchanges, psychological states, or achievement scores. Any effort to concentrate on a single dimension of classroom life, such as teacher reactions to students' answers or interpersonal affect between teachers and students, must be seen within the large context of the classroom events within which these phenomena occur.

The picture of classroom management that emerges from Gump's work is rich with possibilities for both theoretical and practical understanding (Doyle, 2006). The central task for teachers and students is to jointly construct a *context*, that is, an "ongoing dynamic accomplishment of people acting together with shared tools" (Russell, 1997, p. 509). To achieve the goal of order (i.e., student cooperation in a program of action appropriate for engaging with a particular curriculum task), a teacher must organize classroom life and recruit, invite, persuade, or convince the students to join forces with her or him in participating in events for specific periods of time. Among the tools available for the teacher are various teaching principles, such as constructivism or direct instruction, and methods or lesson formats, such as Daily Oral Language or the five-paragraph theme (Johnson, Smagorinsky, Thompson, & Fry, 2003), as well as conceptions of children and their development, curriculum guides, colleague models, and personal experiences. Such processes play a central role in constituting and stabilizing order at a moment in time and, thus, play an essential part in classroom management practice.

Implications for Person-Centered Approaches to Classroom Management

Where do person-centered approaches to classroom management fit into this outline of classroom theory? This is an important question, not only in the context of this issue of *Theory*

Into Practice, but also within the traditions of classroom management.

Person-centered approaches can be easily justified on ethical, moral, humanitarian, and educational grounds. It simply makes sense that we should treat one another with dignity and caring in the busy institutional life of schools. Moreover, a person-centered educational experience is essential in achieving the important curricular outcome of a sustained life-long commitment to learning and responsible citizenship. However, given that many models and approaches in classroom management have roots in clinical psychology, there is a strong emphasis in the field on individual qualities and reactions with a concomitant tendency to neglect context in formulating ideas about the core dynamics of managing classrooms (Charles, 2008).

As an ecologist, I am disposed to emphasize context as a central ingredient defining and holding order in place in managing classrooms successfully. If the important work of building context is not attended to, then it is unlikely that a well-managed classroom will spontaneously emerge. At the same time, ecological thinking can easily overlook the people who carry out their lives in classroom habitats. So bringing these perspectives together in a balanced framework seems crucial to advancing the field. Contexts are, in important ways, jointly constructed by participants and depend upon the willingness of participants to cooperate in creating order together. It is in achieving this cooperation, I would argue, that a person-centered commitment has enormous power. Practices that reflect a person-centered orientation invite students to engage in classroom events and engender the kind of personal allegiances and affiliations necessary for creating and sustaining productive learning communities.

In sum, person-centered practices are necessary, but insufficient, conditions for management success. They will not, by themselves, forge a productive context in the absence of attention to activities and programs of action. Durable classroom contexts, however, require that participants have a continuing sense that they are respected and valued. The question, then, is not

whether one approach is better than another. Rather, the central point is to understand how different approaches complement each other in orchestrating the conditions necessary for sustaining productive classroom environments for students. It is in this sense that the articles in this issue are fundamental contributions to classroom management theory and practice.

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