



ESTABLISHING CLASSROOM ROUTINES & RITUALS

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Without routines there is no structure to your classroom.

Without structure no one knows what to do.

As a graduate teacher you will have to deal with many new routines. Decisions will range from what to teach and how you organise your classroom, yard duty rosters through to which coffee cup to use at morning tea. Much of the information shared from others will be well intended but overwhelming, and at times it will be hard to know just where to start. Students have the same experience every time they encounter a new teacher.

This article will focus on how establishing consistent routines and procedures can help you and the students you teach. It will outline why having predictable patterns in place will allow you to develop an environment where learning can occur. As a graduate teacher it is important to take small steps and focus on establishing yourself as a calm and confident teacher. 'Getting it right' in the early years of teaching is taking the time to create the learning environment that you want - an environment that is safe, supportive and conducive to learning.

What I do at the start of the year?

Teach the skills and attributes to be successful at school

and what they look like in your classroom

Classroom excellence is built on a foundation of well-taught procedures and systems, which with repetition and consistency become rituals. When we understand this, we give ourselves permission to

invest time in explicitly teaching these. We cannot expect the knowledge of these routines to happen by chance.

Students do not learn by osmosis. Just as we explicitly teach students how to be good readers, writers and mathematicians – teachers also need to teach the skills and attributes needed to be successful at school and what that looks like in the classroom. Whilst it takes time to establish these routines, setting up and embedding these routines ensures effective teaching time.

We need to be conscious of the essential routines and rituals needed to support students in the classroom. Knowing and teaching these helps keep a classroom running smoothly and wasted time is minimised, as students know what to do. Developing classroom routines such as entering the classroom, transitioning between activities, managing equipment and knowing what to do when stuck all ensure your classroom has flow.

I use the following five routines:

- ***Meet and greet at the door***

Having a procedure for how your students enter the room is important. It sets the tone and the mindset young people bring to the learning space. Meeting and greeting your students at the door allows you to quickly gauge how young people might be feeling and provides an opportunity for a positive interaction. This can be as simple as; 'Smile, say hello and use the student's name'.

If you are able to add to this with an acknowledgment of something you know about the student even better. This simple strategy is an effective way to quickly build relationships.

- ***5,4,3,2,1.....***

Good teaching practice is having a consistent anchor spot from which to give instructions, supported by a consistent, effective signal to get students' attention.

It is important to teach students that when you stand in a particular location, that is your instructional space and they are required to stop and listen. Moving to the anchor spot and using non-verbal cues such as an open hand and counting backwards 5,4,3,2,1 whilst closing down each finger is a simple yet effective way to get students' attention.

There are many great attention getting strategies, it's just a matter of finding the one that works for you and sticking with it.

- ***Teaching Table***

A Teaching Table is an excellent way to demonstrate a learning task to students. Typically, this is a cluster of tables that students can sit around with the remaining students standing behind them in a fish bowl configuration. It can be useful for you, the teacher, to also have

your own workbook and/or equipment. Having this allows you to demonstrate exactly the task/game that the young people will be completing. When you teach young people this routine, a simple prompt such as 'make me a teaching table' will then allow for students to quickly gather for instruction.

- ***Tight Transitions***

Off-task behaviours are more likely to happen when students transition from one task to another, or from instruction to task. It is important to minimise the opportunities for distraction and forgetting what to do.

When equipment is easily accessible in multiple collection points around the room, you make the transition from instruction to task a smooth one. Often it can be effective for students to have their equipment out first on their table before giving the instructions or a demonstration of what to do. Doing this also means the likelihood of forgetting what to do is reduced as they move seamlessly from instruction to task.

- ***The 5 Bs***

Effective teachers teach students what to do when they are stuck on their work. The 5Bs provides concrete strategies:

teach kids when they are stuck to use their **B**rain
(the answer may be in there somewhere)

check the **B**oard or **B**ook,

ask a **B**uddy

get Help from the **B**oss (the teacher)

You could also add

Browse, students can use Google as a tool to find the answer they are looking for.

Another popular strategy is C3B4Me (look in three places).

Helping students know what to do when the learning provides obstacles reduces the likelihood of students being off task. When we make routines explicit and implement them consistently, we are more likely to centre the thinking of students on their core job – learning. This is because clear and consistent expectations, explicitly taught, helps calm the brain and reduce anxiety – for both the student and us.

Research on learning, behaviour and the brain

The emotion brain and learning brain operate like a set of balance scales

In recent years neuroscience has made rapid gains and educators have started to become more aware of the research on the brain, behaviour and learning.

I have been applying the work of Nathan Wallis, who specialises in helping educators understand the brain. Nathan has explained the significant relationship between the emotion brain and the learning brain and how this impacts a young person's ability to focus on their learning. Nathan's theory is that the emotion brain and learning brain operate like a set of balance scales. When emotions are high the learning part of our brain is low, and we are unable to think logically, manage our emotions, or see things from the others point of view. We find planning and logical thinking difficult. These are of course the essential executive functioning skills needed to be successful in learning.

There are many things we cannot control about a young person's emotions, but we can control the quality of the relationships, the consistency of the expectations and the quality of the teaching. Getting this right in the classroom helps to keep emotions low and thinking high.

Evidence-based resources currently available to support structured lessons

Sound lesson structures reinforce routines and scaffold learning

High Impact Teaching Strategies: Structuring lessons

The benefit of routines being established is also evident in the Department's resource [High Impact Teaching Strategies \(HITS\)](#). The HITS are 10 reliable instructional practices that aim to increase student learning when they are applied. Strategy 2 of the HITS focuses on *Structuring Lessons* and acknowledges that sound lesson structures reinforce routines and scaffold learning. It notes that effective teachers plan and deliver lessons that are structured by incorporating clear steps and transitions. Conscious thinking should therefore not only be given to what to teach but to also the lesson structure and the routines within this structure. When students follow structures, time on task is optimised and transitions between, and within tasks, occur smoothly.

A framework for measuring success: Practice principles

The [Practice Principles for Excellence and Teaching and Learning](#) (Practice Principles) also outline the importance of co-designing, with students, learning and behaviour norms.

Establishing learning and behavioural norms early in the school year is important in establishing transparent and purposeful learning behaviours within your classroom.

Another approach to rituals and routines

In my teaching I have also used the Three Step Approach to teaching classroom routines and procedures (Wong and Wong 2018).

1. *Explain*

In the classroom the starting point is to have a clear understanding of the routines you would like to implement to ensure safety and to promote productive learning time. Thought needs to be given to why a particular routine is needed and the steps to be taught for the routine to be learnt. When this knowledge is clear in your thinking you are then able to effectively explain and demonstrate what is required of the students. I always anchor these conversations on the importance of classrooms being safe and allowing people to learn.

2. *Rehearse*

It is unreasonable for students to learn all procedures in one day. We cannot expect that students 'get it' the first time. It is important that students practice a procedure with our help and support, focussing on achieving each step successfully. At times this can be frustrating as it often means repeating the procedure until it becomes routine. When you feel frustration growing it is important to remember to breathe and know that time invested is time saved.

3. *Reinforce*

When procedures are performed correctly, there should be acknowledgement to reinforce what you want the young people in your space to continue doing. Generally, this is a great time to become a 'Narrator of the Positive' (Wong and Wong 2018) by talking about students in the third person. This means articulating your thinking out loud with comments such as 'I can see that Billy is ready for learning. His eyes are on me and his hands are still'. It is important to always put the spotlight on the behaviour you want more of.

Ongoing challenges

Routines and expectations built on strong relationships provide a strong anchor point to calmly reject inappropriate behaviour

Despite having, and explicitly teaching clearly defined routines there will be times when students engage in inappropriate behaviour, either by choice or default, and impact the flow of learning and the routines that have been implemented. This happens in all classrooms no matter how experienced the teacher is.

When students have a clear understanding of the expectations, you have a tool and anchor point to remain calm and consistent, even on the most difficult days or with the most challenging behaviours. This is because the focus is on rejecting the behaviour rather than the person when managing these moments. The key message being given when we respond to wrong doing is 'I like you, but not your behaviour'.

Simple phrases such as 'Stop. What's our procedure for entering the classroom?' or 'You're calling out. What's the agreed way for contributing to our classroom discussion?' are helpful. The focus when we respond this way is always on what we want the young person to stop doing but more importantly what we want them to start doing instead, and how we can help and support them to do it.

When we have a clear understanding of the routines, we are more able to operate from the thinking part of our brain and respond logically. When our emotions get in the way we tend to react rather than respond to misbehaviour. When we operate from emotions, we can take student behaviour personally. An understanding of the routines and expectations built on strong relationships provides a strong anchor point to calmly reject the behaviour and redirect the young person to the agreed successful learning behaviours.

Key takeaways for graduate teachers

Quality teaching delivered in a well-managed classroom results in increased learning outcomes. You may worry about what to do when things go wrong but it is important to focus on what you can do to prevent things going wrong. It is always better to be proactive rather than reactive. Quality teachers are consistent, persistent and calm.

Top tips for developing structured and routines

The three most important things you can do to become an effective and inspirational teacher are:

- 1) Invest in developing quality student teacher relationships.
- 2) Take the time to explicitly teach the routines and behaviours that allow your classroom to flow smoothly and for students to be successful learners.
- 3) Find the routines that work for you and your students, teach these, reinforce these and rely on them.

Top questions to start a conversation with your mentor

- 1) What are 3 routines your mentor uses to ensure their classroom works efficiently?
- 2) How did you mentor teacher establish these learning and behaviour norms?
- 3) What is your mentor's advice for when a strategy or procedure is not working?

References

Alsop, P., Wallis, N. 2018, *The art of parenting*, Potter and Burton, Nelson, NZ.

Wong, H., & Wong, R. 2018, *The First Days of School: how to be an effective teacher*, Harry K Wong publications, UK.