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Using Desists in Classroom Management

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Growing up, one of my all-time favorite TV cartoons was Quickdraw McGraw and his faithful companion, Babalooi (does that date me?). Do you remember it? Quickdraw was the noble but naive, quick-on-the-trigger sheriff who fought off wicked desperados who inevitably found their way into his small, quiet prairie town.

Sheriff Quickdraw's first attempt at stopping a criminal type was to cry out, "Cease and desist!" Of course, it never worked. What hardened criminal would desist bad behavior just because you tell them to? Which brings up the question, when learners misbehave, how do you get them to desist without disrupting the learning process?

While those of us who teach graduate level courses rarely have classroom management problems as those in undergraduate and lower grades, when they do happen, they can derail the learning experience. I once had to dismiss an adjunct in a graduate course mid-semester due to her poor handling of classroom management issues, mostly due to her inexperience. Because she was not able to get her classroom under control early by providing effective interventions (desists), things just got worse, to the point that the situation became unsalvageable.

Fortunately, there are effective ways for a teacher to say "Cease and desist" to stop off-task behavior and get learning back on track. A teacher who knows how to stop class disruption before it spreads not only stops the deviancy, but at the same time has a positive effect on other learners in the class.

A **desist** is an action the teacher makes to stop off-task learner behavior. The trick of course, is to use desists which not only stop unwanted behavior but will not also distract the other learners in the class. For example, if a teacher uses angry, punitive desists, then the acting out learner may stop his or her misconduct, but the ripple effect on the other learners will cause an increase in emotional anxiety which disrupts learning, and possibly causes additional unwanted disruptive behavior. An effective teacher gives attention to the quality of desist, those characteristics of teacher behavior used to stop disruptive learner conduct. **Quality of desist** has three indicators: Clarity, Roughness, Task-Force, and Approval-Focus.

Clarity of Desist. Clarity refers to behavior on your part that specifies who the acting-out learner is, what he or she is doing wrong, and why this is improper behavior or what the proper behavior is.

Roughness of Desist. Roughness refers to the way an attempt to stop misbehavior expresses impatience and anger, or ways the teacher's facial or bodily behavior expresses anger.

Task-Force Desist. The task-force desist refers to ways you direct learners to the task at hand as the desist is given.

Major Deviance Desist. In this teacher behavior, the teacher selects the major disruption when two or more deviancies occur simultaneously. The rule is to focus on the major disruption and ignore the lesser.

Correct Target Desist. In this behavior, the teacher desists the learner who caused the disruption, not a bystander.

Approval-Focus Desist. In this student-affirming teacher action, you make a statement that implies your warmth toward and feeling for the learners. This type of desist loses its effectiveness after about the third grade.

Research in classroom management indicates that:

- Soft reprimands are more effective in controlling disruptive behavior than loud reprimands, and that when soft reprimands are used, fewer are needed
- Learners who witnessed a punitive or angry desist responded with more behavior disruption than when they observed a desist without roughness
- Task-focused desists resulted in more favorable ripple effect on the conduct of learners than the approval-focus desists
- When a simple reprimand was observed, learners felt the teacher was fairest and able to maintain control.

Learning effective desist techniques is one of the most valuable skills a teacher can master. A teacher who can minimize time spend on classroom and behavior management will increase the time he or she has for actual teaching and instruction. One study found that teachers trained in specific management behaviors, including the use of positive questioning techniques

and soft reprimands/desists, decreased the amount of non-instructional time by 20 minutes per day!

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