Protocols in the classroom

Teaching the foundation of collaboration: setting classroom agreements using ChalkTalk protocol

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In the previous post I described a complex culminating project, the creation of a living museum, in which groups of students collaborated to research,write and perform scenes about life in Ancient Athens. Teaching upper elementary students to collaborate over complex projects does not happen overnight. In my classroom the foundations start way back in the culture of the classroom established at the very beginning of the year. Collaboration requires each student to grasp the idea that the long term common purpose is more important than their individual immediate impulses. In fact "We, not Me*" needs to become the class's code of conduct,

> "*Collaboration requires each student to grasp the idea that the long term common purpose is more important than their individual immediate impulses.*"

and in this post I shall be describing my process for establishing these foundations.

Most teachers introduce their class rules in the first lesson with a new class, and I did so myself for many years. This has the benefit of making explicit your expectations and, when they are posted on the wall, gives you a convenient third point to refer to when correcting student behavior. This helps to make it more of a procedural issue and less of a personal one. This is certainly way better than having no explicit rules at all and the class running on tacit agreements such as only becoming quiet when the teacher has become really angry. (You may read more about Agreements in the Classroom, and about the Importance of Agreements in the linked NSRF Connections articles and in the [C] Setting Agreements Activity.)

However, I have discovered over the years that there is a great power in investing some time and involving all students in identifying and agreeing upon the necessary 'rules' for the class. My Rules become Our Agreements. This brings about a fundamental shift in the dynamic of the classroom from one of power and opposition to one of trust, collaboration and cooperation: what "I am doing to you for your own good" gives way to what we are doing together to help us all learn.

So, how can a teacher facilitate the creation of class agreements?

I discovered these wonderful

questions from Mrs Rouse on Pinterest and adapted them to create my own agreements setting activity. I start the year by rolling out two large sheets of butcher paper each with one of the following questions written in the center,

"What kind of teacher would you like to have this year?"

"What kind of students would your teacher like to have this year"

I have the students respond on the charts in a [O] [M] Chalk Talk Activity, one of my class's favorites, in which you give time for all the students to silently write their responses, link to other students' ideas with arrows and show agreement to points made by adding a check or a star.

Once the activity of responding has died down we gather around one chart at a time and identify the most important ideas. I like to write them out along the top of the paper as criteria. I review the criteria for the teacher, explain anything that might be a problem, and promise to uphold their expectations to the best of my ability.

Then I give each student four stickers and ask them to place them on the student criteria they think are the most essential. We can easily see where the data clusters by doing this. We discuss whether some criteria are actually covered by others, for example, the class this year decided that Be Ready was already covered by Be Responsible. We also ensure that we have phrased everything in terms

of Does rather than Don'ts. If I think that something really significant has been omitted, I will suggest it at this point.

> *"This year we have just four agreements:*
> *Be Kind,*
> *Be Responsible,*
> *Be Resourceful, and*
> *Be Respectful."*

This year we have just four agreements: Be Kind, Be Responsible, Be Resourceful and Be Respectful.

At the end, I like to add a little drama, so we all stand, put our hands on our hearts and say, "I solemnly swear that I will do my best this year to be kind, responsible, resourceful and respectful!" and then we ceremoniously hang the agreements on the wall in a conspicuous place.

Creating buy-in by negotiating agreed-upon norms empowers the students themselves to become the ones who regulate them. I always post our agreements in the classroom and periodically spend time reviewing them with my class. My key questions are, "How are we doing with our agreements?" and, "Do we need to change or add anything?" I prefer to teach my students not to use names as they reflect on what has been happening, instead to say "some students have been…" because I want them to get the sense that the important focus is on the behavior not the individuals. This helps students to better hear the feelings being expressed rather than become immediately defensive.

I have certainly found that since using this method my classes are much more fun to teach! I am not engaged in a constant battle for control and I have the tools to gently, yet effectively, have students redirect each other's behavior. In this way I start to teach the values of collaboration, model collaboration at the very highest level of the classroom and begin

to bring in the language students will need to be able to negotiate amongst themselves as they move towards complex collaborative projects, later in the year. Although I prefer to use this process in the initial weeks of the year, it could be equally useful to introduce collaboration at the beginning of a specific project later on.

Acknowledgments:

As teachers we all learn from others. Combining ideas into something new and sharing them is, for me a great part of the joy in the work I do and a driving force behind this blog. I am committed to always try to attribute my sources and where possible link back to them. I would be grateful for any feedback if I omit anyone and will be only too happy to make updates to posts.

As a accredited National Facilitator, I have been heavily influenced by the work I am doing with Critical Friends Groups for teachers, using the materials created by the National Schools Reform Faculty (NSRF) and am interested in exploring how these materials can be used with children as well as adults. The activity above is based upon the NSRF Setting Agreements protocol and the Chalk Talk protocol and has been adapted by me for use with upper elementary students.

"We, not Me*" is an slogan I learned from Laura Candler in her highly recommended Back to School Starter Pack available on Teachers Pay Teachers.

I would love to hear about other ways you establish collaboration in your classroom. Please email me or visit my blog and comment to join the conversation!

Have a great week!

Penny

Mini-protocol around using ChalkTalk to generate classroom agreements

In advance of the students arriving, set up two spaces for the Chalk Talks. At the center of one, write "What kind of teacher would you like to have this year?" On the other, "What kind of students would your teacher like to have this year?" Cover focusing questions with spare pieces of paper.

1. Discuss the value of collaboratively-set agreements instead of teacher-created rules.

2. Explain the rules of ChalkTalk. Point out the location of markers, reveal the questions, and invite participation.

3. Watch participants have two simultaneously "silent conversations." Feel free to add question marks if any comments seem confusing or incomplete.

4. When "conversations" die down, gather around the "teacher" chart and write the most important ideas along the top of the chart paper as criteria. Explain anything that might be a problem and uphold the students' expectations.

5. Move to the "students" chart and hand out sticky dots to students. Ask them to use the dotes to vote on the three or four most important ones.

6. Review the ideas with the most dots. Discuss whether some criteria are already covered by others, or might be combined or clarified. Add any crucial ideas if they're missing. Ask for and chart the final list, then post it visibly within the classroom.

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Have you written a thesis or dissertation on a topic associated with

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Now and then, we hear from someone seeking published research on the efficacy of Critical Friends Group® work, or the use of protocols in the classrooms. We're happy to share research we have on file, but realize that it's a bit dated. We expect some of you can point us to fresher research. If you know of any studies we should know about, too, please contact luci@nsrfharmony.org. Thanks so much!

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