

Hide your emotions



Your teaching performance may not have received an Academy Award, but scripted, planned and well-rehearsed responses refine teachers' classroom control, says **Paul Dix**...

Sometimes it is easy to improvise your way through difficult conversations about behaviour. Early in the week we are sharp, quick witted and almost enjoy the battle of words. Five days later the wit has been blunted by tiredness. Personally, I have lost too many weekends worrying about how I managed some of the trickiest children on a Friday afternoon. When my improvisation skills

are impaired I need a fall back, a plan, a script even. One that deals with the behaviour intelligently and protects the child and the teacher. One that limits the damage we risk with weary improvisation.

Teaching is a performance without applause and with little time for make up. It is a stand-up routine complete with unpredictable hecklers and gentle missiles lobbed from the cheap seats

at the back. The demands of the finest performance have changed little over time. To convince children that there is no place that we would rather be, to feign surprise and disappointment at poor behaviour, to pretend that it really matters who goes in the front of the line. Our often tongue-in-cheek responses and sustained characterisation allows us to perform the role of model human beings.

Be dull and predictable

Zoom out of the classroom and everyone is involved in their own learned routines. Take a moment to map what is happening. From routine wriggling on the carpet to Oscar's last word obsession, from Alfie's self-esteem spiral to Charlene's 'best friend'-a-day strategy. Tackle these routines with emotion and you risk encouraging them. Better to interrupt them with the dull predictability of your formal response: 'You decided to break our rule about...(lining up, staying on task, bringing military hardware into school, etc) you have chosen to...(move to the back, catch up work at lunchtime, speak to the man from Scotland Yard), you need to think carefully about your next move.'

Perceived weaknesses in your use of language and tone of voice often lead to instructions being ignored or rejected immediately

The script should be performed without anger or shards of frustration. It needs the serious tone of a hospital drama and the certainty of a news broadcast. The tone must be reassuringly consistent; the body language must compliment the spoken message. Perceived weaknesses in your use of language and tone of voice often lead to instructions being ignored or rejected immediately. 'Please take your coat off, I am too tired to deal with you today', or, 'If you are not going to listen to me, I cannot teach you', for example.

Instead of rewarding the children for poor behaviour with your emotion, plan your response. Script it, rehearse it and perform it with that dull, formal, predictable voice that

Would I lie to you?

EIGHT TEACHING FIBS WORTHY OF AN OSCAR...

- 'There is no place that I would rather be'
- 'I am not getting annoyed/frustrated/incandescent with rage'
- 'I am not at all shocked at your behaviour'
- 'It really is important who goes at the front of the line'
- 'You are all my favourites'
- (Even in the light of very recent experience) 'I know that you are responsible'
- 'I am a model human being'
- 'I live in the cupboard!'

rewards nobody. It will feel odd at first. False even. But integrate it into your performance and you have a response to poor behaviour that children don't like. Good. Moreover, you have a predictable response that allows

exasperation, the times when the mask slips. You are not a computer generated teacher but a fallible, imperfect human being. Just like the children sitting in front of you.

Experienced teachers no longer feel the weight of performance. They are well rehearsed and slip into convincing character with aplomb. Yet even these old stagers (and I include myself) can rely too much on past performances. Although every Thursday afternoon feels like the last day of a lengthy panto run we all need to keep our performances fresh. How you habitually respond to behaviour is worth examining. What message are you repeatedly sending? 'I am fed up with your behaviour!' or 'Your behaviour, your responsibility'. Which phrases do you constantly repeat? Do you say 'OK?' at the end of each sentence, 'Shh' 89 times an hour or 'Chelsea I've told you to...?' every 30 seconds? What is your teaching tick? Which scripts do the children use? Which response patterns do they employ to divert, irritate and distract you? I use assertive sentence stems that kick me into the right tone and language:

- 'You need to' – speak to me at the end of the lesson
- 'I need to see' – you following the routine
- 'I expect' – a focused ten minutes of work to end the lesson
- 'I know you will' – look at the learning ritual before starting this task
- 'Thank you for' – picking the wrapper up
- 'I have heard what you said, now you must ...' (redirecting the conversation)
- 'We will' – emphasising shared responsibility

Tweaking your performance to change the behaviour of others is an intelligent long-term strategy. As you prepare to enter, stage left, remember that although your performance seems temporary, the impact is felt long after the curtain falls.



tip

TRY THIS USEFUL SCRIPT

'You need to understand that every choice has a consequence. If you choose to do the work, that would be fantastic and this will happen... If you choose not to do the work, then this will happen... I'll leave you to make your decision.'

Plan your performance

With so much of your time taken by planning curriculum delivery there is little left to fine tune your own performance. Take a side of A4 and a moment to plan your performance. Identify the behaviours that are your priority for this week/term, script and structure your negative interventions, identify five consistencies that are absolute and take control of the direction of travel. You are not expected to give award winning performances without imperfections. Aim for getting it right eight out of 10 times. The children will forgive the odd dropped line or mistimed cue. They will even forgive those rare moments of

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- Paul Dix is an award winning behaviour specialist. For more about his live and online training see pivotaleducation.com