

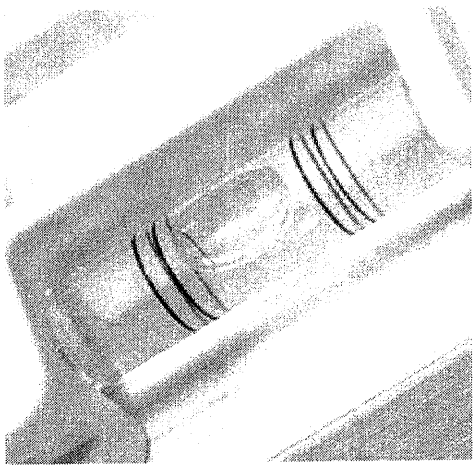
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Classroom Management: Finding the Balance Between Too Rigid and Too Flexible

By: Maryellen Weimer, PhD in Effective Classroom Management



For quite some time now I've been interested in a widely held set of assumptions faculty make about the need to assert control at the beginning of a course. The argument goes something like this: When a course starts, the teacher needs to set the rules and clearly establish who's in charge. If the course goes well, meaning students abide by the rules and do not challenge the teacher's authority, then the teacher can gradually ease up and be a bit looser about the rules. The rationale behind this approach rests on the assumption that if a teacher loses control of a class, it is very hard to regain the upper hand. In these cases, student behaviors have compromised the climate for learning so seriously that the teacher has an ethical responsibility to intervene and reassert control.

But these examples are also extreme and, in my experience, rare. Far more common are classroom environments where the teacher is so in control that students passively perform what look like learning tasks (taking notes, feigning attention, etc.). Lately I've been wondering how much control is necessary to set the conditions for learning and whether that amount of control doesn't need to be offset by a certain amount of freedom so that students can make the learning experience meaningful to them. And then there's the question as to how teacher control affects the motivation to learn? Do students learn more or learn better in classrooms that are rule bound?

More fundamentally, I've been wondering if those assumptions about needing to establish control at the outset are supported by evidence, experiential or otherwise. What happens if you don't? Do students automatically rise up and take control? Why do I have such trouble imagining students doing that? They seem so beaten down already.

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More sinister are questions of whether teachers don't benefit more from the control they assert than students do, even though most faculty I know would go to their graves arguing that they only control for the students' sake. A tightly controlled classroom environment certainly makes for safer, saner teaching. If all potential challenges to authority are headed off at the pass, then the teacher can devote full attention to the content, and isn't that where the teacher's expertise really shines? And so the classroom becomes a place that showcases teaching more than learning?

My suspicion is that most teachers overreact to potential threats. Why? Do they question whether they can respond successfully to challenges? Are they in denial about the vulnerabilities that are inherently a part of teaching? Do they like this feeling of control? Depending on the teacher, all these answers may be possibilities, but I think for more teachers, it's a matter of not trusting students or having lost faith in all of them because of the actions of a few.

It is true that students unaccustomed to the rigors of college learning look for the loopholes. They opt for the easy way—so if the teacher stands idly by, they will not demand much of themselves or their classmates. Most of today's college students aren't going to do well in an environment where there are no rules, little structure, and low expectations, but the question is how much do they and their teachers need and how is the learning environment compromised when teachers err on the side of rigid control?

Please share your strategies for finding an effective middle ground between no structure and rigid structure.

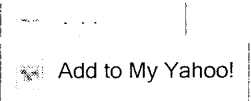
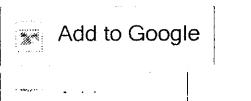
Reprinted from How Much Control for How Much Learning? *The Teaching Professor*, 22.3 (2008): 4,5.

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