

Fred Jones on Integrating Good Teaching and Classroom Management

In this thoughtful broadsheet, classroom management expert Fred Jones (author of *Tools for Teaching*, 2007), draws a parallel between PBIS (Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports) and RTI (Response to Intervention), two widely used programs for improving (respectively) discipline and instruction. Both use a three-tier prevention/intervention pyramid in which 80 percent of the effort goes into working with all students, 15 percent into targeted group interventions (for students who aren't making it after Tier 1), and about 5 percent into intensive individual interventions (for students who still aren't on track).

These models make sense, says Jones, and should be used in tandem to handle both discipline and instruction in schools – but he has two concerns. First, neither PBIS nor RTI is very specific about what Tier 1 looks like in classrooms. And second, the two models have not been integrated. “PBIS and RTI are separate institutions housed at separate universities run by separate groups of academicians,” says Jones. “Integration is left to practitioners.”

Jones believes he has the answer to this challenge and presents several nuggets from his book and workshops:

- *The problem of forgetting* – A perennial issue in classrooms, says Jones, is that too much instruction consists of teacher talk – extended lectures in high school and even in elementary school, ten minutes or more of teacher explanations at a time. “Too much talking,” says Jones. “Too much sitting. Not enough doing.” The problem is that the human brain has very poor long-term memory for information that comes in through our ears. Too much teacher talk results in cognitive overload, student anxiety, and valuable information going in one ear and out the other. It also results in discipline problems when the teacher assigns independent work, lots of students need help (*What part don't you understand? All of it!*), and frustration, disengagement, and acting-out behavior increase. Jones is skeptical of cooperative learning as a solution: too often student groups talk about other stuff or one student does all the work while the others coast.

“What if, after we give our students a ‘chunk’ of input, we had them do something with it *immediately*?” asks Jones. He suggests a two-step model: Reduce the amount of “stuff” we give kids before asking them to do something with it, and then have them do something with it *immediately*, before they have time to forget.

The ineffective model: *Input, Input, Input, Input – Output*

A better model: *Input, Output, Input, Output, Input, Output*

“Learning by doing focuses on *performance*,” says Jones. “The teaching of performance is usually referred to as *coaching*... assessment is continuous, not something that is separated from performance and delayed until its relevance is lost... You explain what to do next. You model what to do next. Then you have the student(s) do that step while you watch like a hawk. If there is an error, you fix it immediately before it becomes a bad habit. You may repeat that step a few times to iron out the kinks. Then, when you are satisfied with performance, you proceed to the next step... Typically, therefore, three-quarters of the teacher's time is spent in work-check and feedback while three-quarters of the students' time is spent in *doing*.” This process is even more streamlined when there is a visual instructional plan or exemplar posted at the front of the room that students can refer to at any point.

- *Say, see, do teaching* – The key to corrective feedback is giving it during initial acquisition and having high standards, says Jones. To use an athletic analogy, a sixth-grade basketball coach

explains to his players how to bend their knees to play defense, models it, and then asks them to do it. If one player has his knees only slightly bent, the coach immediately corrects him: *I'm going to put my hand on your shoulder. Keep bending your knees as long as I'm pushing down... There, that's it. That's how defense feels.*

“Good coaches know that you walk a razor’s edge when you teach someone to perform a skill,” says Jones. “There is no neutral ground upon which to land. If your trainee does not learn to do ‘it’ right, he or she learns to do it wrong. The only alternative to a good habit is a bad habit. Bad habits are very hard to break. Coaches, therefore, are perfectionists. In the words of Vince Lombardi, legendary coach of the Green Bay Packers, *Practice does not make perfect. Only perfect practice makes perfect.*”

Next comes structured practice – walking students through performance with continual assessment and immediate feedback, having students repeat the performance, slowly at first, the teacher watching closely to spot and correct errors. This works with skills as different as playing the guitar, using a tool in a wood shop, learning effective public speaking, or blocking a scene for a play. “With additional practice, speed and fluidity gradually develop,” says Jones. “But a good coach makes sure that correct performance is *never* sacrificed for speed... Students, of course, always want to go for speed too soon. They want to ‘run and gun’ in basketball or play ‘hot licks’ with the guitar like their heroes. The eternal struggle of the teacher in building perfect practice is to slow students down until they can increase speed *without* increasing error... *Teaching* something means teaching your students to do it *right*. To coach Lombardi’s dictum you can add the words of UCLA basketball coach John Wooden: *You haven’t taught until they have learned.*”

• *Teaching concepts versus skills* – Jones disagrees with the common notion that social studies is more conceptual than mathematics or playing a musical instrument. “All skills are simply conceptual operations that are expressed through performance, perfected through feedback, and made permanent through practice,” he says. “Social studies teachers can be seduced into thinking that their subject is uniquely ‘conceptual’ if they rely heavily on lecturing. When input is divorced from output, teachers tend to drift into a ‘mentalist’ model of learning – the notion that understanding occurs as a direct result of input... We do not create understanding directly. We create it *indirectly*. Understanding is a byproduct of experience. Our job as teachers is to create that experience. Without doing something with conceptual input *quickly*, it will simply dissipate – another example of ‘in one ear and out the other.’”

In the humanities, the challenge is how to get students to *do* a concept. Jones describes three ways to accomplish this:

- Talking – for example, brainstorming as a class, turning and talking with a partner, partner teaching (pairs of students taking turns reteaching the skill to each other), or a formal debate. “Most students graduate from high school without any significant experience in public speaking,” says Jones. “Organizing thoughts for an oral presentation, learning to ‘sell’ those ideas while on your feet, and conquering the anxiety of public speaking are key life skills.”
- Writing – for example, a brief in-class essay can work wonders, with students then sharing their writing in groups of four, choosing the best one, and marking the strongest passages in the margin. “Writing and rewriting are the crucibles in which the fragments of ideas that pass

for understanding in our consciousness are forged into clarity,” says Jones. “Only through writing do we produce rigorous thought.”

- Performing – for example, working out problems at the board, role-playing in class, or acting out a scene.

“Teachers who focus on performance,” says Jones, “repeatedly ask themselves, ‘What will the students be able to do when they leave my class that they could not do when they entered?’”

• *Teaching so it sticks* – “The twin goals of instruction are *comprehension* and *retention*,” says Jones. “We want the students to *get* it and to *keep* it.” The secret is using the three learning modalities effectively: verbal (say), visual (see), and physical (do). “Each modality has unique strengths and weaknesses when it comes to comprehension and long-term memory,” he says. “If you teach to the strengths and avoid the weaknesses, your job can be a lot easier.”

- Verbal – Its strength is comprehension – being able to convey complex meaning. The weakness is long-term memory – *in one ear and out the other*. “When we teach by talking,” says Jones, “we rapidly load information into the verbal modality – the one in which there is almost no storage. This is a prescription for teacher exasperation and student failure... Even if students were to do something with the material before the end of the period, memory loss between input and output would be great.”
- Visual – This can produce instant comprehension – *a picture is worth a thousand words* – and it’s terrific for embedding information in long-term memory. But not everything can be a picture.
- Physical – This can produce deep understanding – *we learn by doing* – but it’s somewhere between verbal and visual in terms of memory; continuous practice is needed to maintain skills, and at some point, we have learned how to ride the bicycle and never forget.

The strengths and weaknesses of these three have been understood since ancient times – the oft-quoted Chinese proverb: *I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do, and I understand.*

The three modalities can be welded together in the classroom in the simple three-part model: *Say, See, Do* – Let me explain what to do next; Watch as I show you; Now, you do it. This pattern is repeated as teachers move through the content, constantly checking for understanding and coaching students through practice. “When we accept that learning takes place *one step at a time*,” says Jones, “and that we learn by doing, the nature of teaching snaps into focus. We teach *performance*. Even with conceptual material, if the student cannot ‘do’ the concept accurately, usually by talking or writing, we cannot say that learning has taken place.”

“Focusing on performance immediately faces us with the issue of *excellence*,” he concludes. “We must build *correct* performance. The only alternative is *incorrect* performance... As the saying goes, ‘It is always cheaper to build it right the first time.’”

A final “Fredism”: “If you find yourself working harder than the students, it is definitely time to rethink your approach to teaching. It is time to return to fundamentals – learning by doing one step at a time... *It is not your job to work yourself to death while the students watch. It is your job to work the students to death while you watch.*”

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