

# Tennis Serving Technique to Cope with Student's Negative Comments

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**ABSTRACT---** *Classroom management has become a key topic in curriculum and instruction. Part of this management is students' comment, especially negative ones. Hence the classroom teacher has to be well-prepared in dealing with these negative comments. Otherwise, he/she will be at loss regarding these comments. One technique of coping with students' negative comments is called "Tennis Serving" in which the teacher has to be ready for returning students' serves (comments), or he/she will lose control of the classroom. Some classroom situations are offered as an application of this technique. It is concluded that students' comments should not belittled, rather they should be dealt with care using this technique.*

**Keywords---** classroom management, students' negative comments, tennis serving technique

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Classroom management is part and parcel of the teaching process in the classroom. It is not sufficient to be knowledgeable in the subject matter of teaching, but it is important to know to manage this subject matter classroom because classroom management helps you teach the subject matter well. Cummings (2000) conclude that classroom management has the greatest effect on student learning, as compared with other factors including cognitive processes, home environment and parental support, school culture, curriculum design, and school demographics. It is obvious that a mismanaged classroom would not fulfill its objectives and does not help the teacher nor the students in the teaching and learning process. Hence, classroom management has to be established first before proceeding with subject matter teaching and learning. One way of achieving effective classroom management is responding positively to students' comments, particularly negative comments. Kohl (2002, 145) suggests that everything that is said and how it is said in the classroom is significant and that "small things—comments, questions, responses, phrases, tone—often make a big difference in students' attitudes, not merely toward their teacher, but toward what their teacher teaches." The use of language in the classroom is a powerful influence.

## 2. STUDENTS' COMMENTS

Students' comments should be taken seriously as they exhibit what is going on in their mind and they give us a response to our teaching. As you become a more experienced teacher, you realize more and more that it is the way you use language which is crucial in controlling behaviour. The teacher's questions and responses make the class feel that he/she values their feedback and that he/she is willing to make changes. The students feel connected to the teacher. Getting feedback from students and using it to improve teaching creates a climate of trust. The problem is that students' comments may be negative or surprising to the teacher and he/she is at a loss for an appropriate response.

## 3. NEGATIVE COMMENTS

You are not teaching angels, rather you are teaching human beings; to err is human. Students' negative comments pose challenges to teachers. These comments may include responding angrily, using inappropriate or vulgar comments, using verbal abuse with other students. Cummings (2000) adds that negative language and other forms of put-downs are considered emotional threats. A study shed some light on explanations for teachers' use of aggressive management

techniques in the form of a survey of 507 primary and secondary teachers in Australia (Lewis, 2004). Teachers indicated how often they used techniques such as:

- yelling angrily at pupils who misbehave.
- keeping a class in because some pupils misbehave.
- making sarcastic comments to pupils who misbehave.

An interesting perspective on student opinions about discipline emerged from a study conducted by Kearney, Plax, Hays and Ivey (1991). They asked college students about the misbehavior of *teachers*. Specifically they asked students to describe behaviors of their teachers that they considered inappropriate. In all, 254 students generated 1,762 examples of specific instances of inappropriate teacher behaviors they had actually witnessed. The list included, among other things, the following:

- Being unprepared or unorganized
- Sarcasm and put-downs
- Verbal abuse
- Lack of response to student questions
- Apathy toward students
- Negative personality
- Showing favoritism

Additionally, results (Henderson, Fisher & Fraser, 2000) have shown that where teachers verbally abuse children, humiliate them by the use of sarcasm, frequently and repeatedly exit them from class, or impose arbitrary and harsh punishments, students can experience a range of short-term and long-term negative consequences. These include less interest in the subjects being taught.

On the hand, the classroom teacher should not respond negatively to students' negative comment. For example, when students make noise, it is inappropriate to threaten them *Stop talking or I will . . .* as it is a negative comment by the teacher. Accordingly, it will lead to a hostile classroom climate. A technique is needed to help teachers turn students' negative comments into positive ones.

#### 4. TENNIS SERVING TECHNIQUE

The approach to classroom management has to be proactive: teachers need to anticipate negative comments from students and respond to them effectively. One way of being proactive is called "tennis serving technique." Young (2011) hinted at a similar technique called "tennis banter." It is to do with the way a teacher can re-frame students' comments to turn negative perceptions into positive ones. It is like tennis because the student serves you a ball and you return the serve to them.

In tennis, it well-known that there are different types of serves. Some of these serves may be effective against certain opponents and others may not. Mixing up all serves through out a match may cause the opponents problems because they can never find a rhythm in returning the serve. Similarly, students may make different types of negative comments (serves) and the teacher should be well-prepared in returning students' serves. On the other hand, when the teacher is not ready for hitting the serves (students' negative comments), he will be at a loss what to do; either to accept the students' negative comments or refusing them in such a way that makes him/her lose good relations with students. Clearly, the teacher's role is not only to return the serve (negative comment), but also to turn it into positive one and teach this technique to students so as to be a habit. Later on, the students themselves will learn this technique of transforming negative comments into positive ones.

This technique has a lot of advantages, among which to enable teachers and students to cut off negative social exchanges and initiate positive ones. This requires teachers to replace negative expectations of students with positive ones; for teachers to learn about and practice assertive behavior. Young (2011) points out that the great thing about this technique is that it keeps the momentum of the lesson going; it provides more energy in the mood of the lesson; it does not resist and reprimand negative comments but uses the flow and energy from this technique in a more productive way; it helps create a positive habit of response in the teacher which is a great asset and lastly, over time, it works away at the negative attitudes of some students to usher them gently into more positive frames of mind. As a more advanced use of this, the teacher can praise the students for their comments in a careful way, as if praising them for a good serve in tennis and then return the ball in such a way as to get them thinking. Cummings (2000) argues that a great warm-up assignment when students arrive in class is to post a helpless thought for students to change to a powerful thought.

The teacher's positive response vary. It may begin with thanking the student for this remark. This thanking controls the negative comment. The reframing may include a suggestion, a clarification, advice, a proverb, a famous quote, a directive, a guideline. So the teacher should have a wide repertoire of these in order to contain the student's negative comment.

## 5. BE SENSITIVE AND ALERT TO STUDENT LANGUAGE

The use of language should be selective because certain words reflect certain attitudes. Hence, teach students to be careful about using language because it gives different indications. Cummings (2000) helps us that when you hear *I can't* help them rephrase by saying *I don't want to . . . ; I have to change to I want to . . . ; and, I should . . . to I've decided to . . .*

## 6. APPLYING THE TENNIS SERVING TECHNIQUE IN THE CLASSROOM SITUATIONS

Following are some situations in which the teacher employ this technique. It is noteworthy that these situation are not inclusive, rather they are merely applications of the technique:

- **A negative comment from a student:** *This exercise is boring.* A suitable reframing comment from the teacher would be: How can we make this more interesting ? Or, In what ways would you like to work on this to bring it alive a bit? Perhaps you could try and see. Why is it boring?
- **If a student said:** *There's too much here to read.* The teacher could reply with: A good remark, Ali! Well done. I think you're right. How could we break this up into chunks to make it more manageable and clearer for us to work on? Maybe we could discuss what is hard to read.
- **A student is placing blame externally:** *This question is too hard to do.* The teacher should understand that the student may use excuses to avoid putting effort into tasks. The teacher helps the student turn the statement into a powerful thought by using supportive replies: Why is it too hard? What is the hard part of it? Try Again. Let me explain the point again. Let's look at the first problem and do it together. I'll bet you already know most of the steps.
- **A student is complaining:** *You gave me a D on my writing and I deserve better.* Attributions like these are a signal that the student is putting the blame on something external. The teacher responds: Thank you for your interest. We could arrange a meeting and discuss your grade.
- **A student is rebuking himself:** *How could I have been so stupid?* The teacher tries to get the student to say: I can learn from that mistake. Keep learning, keep learning!
- **A student's helpless statement:** *I didn't have time to read my story.* Express your appreciation for the student's comment. The teacher might respond with a statement that leads back to fostering internal attributions and sense of control over their life: What other choices did you make this morning? What could you do now to get it read?
- **A student grumbles:** *She calls me a name, but I'm the one who gets sent to the office. It's not fair.* The teacher replies: What happened before she called you a name? When someone calls you a name, what choices do you have? Let's list them and the consequences of each.
- **A pessimist student thinks that:** *I'm a loser, stupid, and will never have friends.* The teacher has to adopt optimistic thinking: if you try, you will succeed. Teach students that: it's all in your head! The optimist sees problems as temporary while the pessimist sees them as permanent and unsolvable. Redirect the student to think about the choice between positive and negative behaviors and the consequences that follow each choice.
- **A student begins to have a tantrum:** *That's not fair!* the teacher should not respond with anger. Stay in control of what you say and do. Remember that the student is simply losing control and can no longer contain his/her emotions. The most effective procedure is the time-out (Kapalka, 2009). You should not handle this situation in front of the class because you might lose control of the situation.
- **In the midst of a social activity, students make comments to each other and tease each other:** Kapalka (2009) advises us keep in mind what is appropriate to expect given the age of the student. If the activity you are

considering involves social interaction, remember that teenagers often feel self-conscious when around others and try hard to portray themselves as independent and able to make their own decisions. You need to consider whether it is realistic for you to expect that none of these behaviors will take place. However, if the situation is one in which everyone is working quietly and no interaction is expected, the technique could be implemented.

- **A student confronts the teacher with the accusation:** *You're not fair!* Some students will even threaten you to go to the “the higher-ups.” Seeman (2010) advises us not discuss these accusations in class; try to defer these discussions to an appointment at your office hours: time-out. On the other hand, you need to formulate fair criteria and rules and standards before you teach the class.
- **A student does not respect his classmate's opinion:** *You're opinion is wrong!* The teacher needs to encourage respect for differing viewpoints. They should be taught the difference between statements of fact and statements about feelings and opinions.
- **Use of pejorative language:** *You're fat!* Make sure students realize that *fat* is a pejorative word. Seeman (2010) points out that pejorative language includes putting down someone's feelings, values, or religion, or even, at times, sarcasm. The teacher has to show displeasure with these kinds of comments.
- **Verbal abuse:** *You're lying! You're too sensitive.* Verbal abuse creates emotional pain and mental anguish. Make students aware of the danger of using such language.
- **Beverly** rarely turns in her class work and produces sloppy work when she does. When questioned about this, she has no clear answers, just a lot of excuses that frequently begin with the words “I can't.” To establish a relationship, Mr. Waters has the following conversation with Beverly:

**Mr. Waters:** Beverly, I would like to find out from you what is really causing your difficulties with your schoolwork.

**Beverly :** I don't know. Beverly looks confused and on the spot.

**Mr. Waters:** I know you are really bright, but somehow that's not showing up in your work. So, do you feel you could do better? I certainly do.

**Beverly :** Probably not. I'm not very smart.

**Mr. Waters:** Why do you say that? I really want to know.

**Beverly :** I never do anything right. It doesn't matter anyway.

**Mr. Waters:** It matters to me, Beverly. When was the last time you thought you did well at something? Not just school stuff?”

**Beverly :** Never.

**Mr. Waters:** Do you have hobbies or sports that you like?

**Beverly :** Well, I guess I do okay at piano and maybe reading my books at home.

**Mr. Waters:** How did you get good at those things?

**Beverly :** Well, I guess I do them a lot and I don't get graded on them either. I like doing them.

**Mr. Waters:** What else? Do you concentrate more?

**Beverly :** I pay more attention, and I don't rush so much.

**Mr. Waters:** How would it be if you did that at school with your work, and I'll help you out, too?

**Beverly :** I'd probably do better.

**Mr. Waters:** Let's give it a try, okay?

Mr. Waters tries to positively emphasize the point that she is very successful at some things (Marzano, R., Marzano, J & Pickering, 2003, 57).

- **Learn different ways to say "That's good!" because variation is needed, such as:**
  - *Smart!*
  - *Good response!*
  - *Awesome!*
  - *Excellent!*
  - *Great!*
  - *Good thinking!*
  - *Tremendous!*

## **7. CONCLUSION**

The tennis serving technique of coping with student's negative comments should be used with care. The classroom teacher, like the tennis player, has to get ready for returning the different kinds of servers, different kinds of negative comments. First, the teacher should control the situation by thanking or appreciating the comment made the student. Then, assess the situation and give a positive comment in the form of many things, such as a suggestion, advice, clarification, or time-out. Teachers should be alert to negative comments and ready for positive comments. Cefai (2008) affirmed that students become attached to teachers who provide positive experiences for them and who tell them and show them that they care about them. They get close to teachers who talk with them, listen to their concerns, make positive comments about their work, express belief in them and encourage them in their learning.

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