Domain 2

Creating Effective and Welcoming Learning Environments

Christopher J. Celeiro

Drexel University

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In reflecting on my five years of teaching theatre at Boys' Latin, I've come to learn that Domain 2 of the Danielson Framework is probably the trickiest to master, and truth be told I don't know if it can ever be completely mastered. Whereas the other domains involve skills that can be finely honed and perfected over the course of an extended period, much of the focus in Domain 2 is the spontaneous, surprising moments in the classroom.

Domain 2, which focuses primarily on how the teacher owns the space with respect, rigor, and ease, sounds like it should be simple, yet a significant portion of the teacher's ability to do so effectively comes from reciprocity of these ideas from the students. During my first year of teaching, I was rostered an Acting class of predominately freshmen that had little to no exposure on the concept of theatre. While it wasn't these students' fault – they didn't elect to be in my class – it was still my responsibility to engage these students in active learning in a respectful manner. I will be the first to admit I failed tremendously at this, despite my efforts. In a classroom of almost 30 14-year-old boys who didn't want to be there, I felt defeated from the get-go. I tried my hardest to establish routines and procedures, keep the classroom space functional and inviting, and speak in a warm and inviting tone. But with the hullabaloo of teenage boys in a window-less room, I found myself frequently violating Component 2a: "Creating an Environment of Respect and Rapport." The primary indicators I failed were "respectful talk, active listening, and turn-talking," "body language indicative of warmth and caring shown by teacher," and "politeness and encouragement" (Danielson, 2013, p. 9). My inability to gain control of the classroom led to extensive yelling or shouting

simply to be heard, and I recall utilizing tones and words that were far from inviting. I interpreted their behavior as disrespect and took it personally, which resulted in a hostile environment ill-equipped for learning. My attempts to dole out appropriate consequences were ineffective due to the cumbersome nature of our discipline system at the time.

This leads me to Component 2d: “Managing Student Behavior.” Over my five years, I sometimes marvel at my ability to effectively manage behavior. I am currently writing this paper while simultaneously proctoring my midterm (yes, I know that probably isn’t kosher). The expectations of the students are so well-engrained that I can type while periodically glancing and seeing *every* student focused on their paper… not their phones, laptops, or other’s papers… students are only out of their seats to grab tissues. I often ask myself how I got to this point. I hate to say this, but there’s no one-size-fits-all answer, and any plans and strategies you may plan to use can easily fly out the window. One of the biggest contributors to my successes in managing student behavior comes from our school’s implementation of PowerSchool Behavior (formerly Kickboard). When the system was first introduced to us, I was reticent to say the least. It seemed pandering, and that there would be very little student buy in. The system only works if all teachers use it with fidelity, rewarding students for positive, above and beyond behaviors while also quickly documenting infractions. Despite my initial stubbornness, I decided to start giving it a serious try. Three years later, I was asked to lead a professional development on efficacy and best practices when utilizing PowerSchool Behavior in the classroom. The speed in which students can be both rewarded and have their inappropriate behaviors penalized allows for me to not lose much time instructing. Furthermore, narrating these behaviors (and memorizing the

numerical codes associated with them) helps students understand that I am not operating with empty threats, but instead acting accordingly. Of course, mastering the use of PowerSchool Behavior did not happen overnight and equally took some practice, but it has proven itself to be an effective classroom management strategy even in the high school setting.

Furthermore, I have found that the way I frame my instructions shifts the dynamic in student excitement. As my students complete their paper benchmark, the ants-in-the-pants are setting in. They have 10 multiple choice questions, 5 true/false, 10 matching, and 1 constructed response. The paper exam is a necessary evil that doesn't encourage students to "share" or "participate" or "challenge." However during the rest of the school year, students *should* be encouraged to do such things, which will engage them further than simply telling them to "write" or "do" or "show." This refers to the concept of emphasizing student ownership, which suggests that making small shifts in the way instructions are delivered can help heighten student engagement and their emotional responses to completing tasks (Anderson, 2021). My least favorite question from students is "How many sentences do we have to write?" I frequently have students complete constructed responses, and I always respond with, "I'm not looking for a sentence number. I'm looking for you to share everything you know relating to the question asked. That could take two sentences, it could take twenty." In retrospect, I could probably come up with a better response. "Challenge yourself to write as much as you can while answering the prompt" or "See if you can make your response as clear and concise as possible" might be better avenues.

Another method of managing student behavior that I have always believed in is restorative practices. One of the questions asked in my job interview back in 2019 was how I would handle situations in which students are disagreeing, do not get along, or are potentially threatening violence toward each other or the teacher. I responded by suggesting that every student needs the opportunity to have their voice heard, and that some form of mediation post-incident would need to occur to get to the bottom of the issue and come up with solutions to prevent the incidents from occurring in the future. Little did I know what I was describing is "restorative justice." The problem was that I have very little experience in mediating restorative justice, and only had a concept in my head of what it might look like. After watching the video by PBS NewsHour (2014), I have a much clearer understanding of what this looks like in practice. Hinkley High School in Aurora, Colorado utilized restorative justice practices in several different ways. Students engage in workshops during their advisory period to develop emotional intelligence and problem-solving skills. Whenever an incident between two or more students occurs, parents are invited as listeners in the restorative justice circles, where each student can verbalize their feelings and opinions on the incident, knowing there is someone there to support them. Though criticized for taking away from core curriculum content, the statistic have shown a significant reduction in detentions, suspensions, and expulsions as the students are maturing and learning how to handle difficult situations. A few years ago, many staff members from my school participated in a professional development where were developed restorative justice practices within each other. At the end of the session, everyone verbalized how they felt these types of sessions needed to be provided to our students. This directly relates to the second PTR core practice, in which

we are to "position students as sense makers by implementing rigorous tasks and content." Just because restorative justice isn't book work doesn't mean it isn't rigorous. In fact, I would argue that emotional intelligence is incredibly difficult to develop, and there is a huge debate about whether this is the responsibility of the parents/guardians or the teachers. Did we forget that it takes a village, and therefore it should be everyone's responsibility? For anyone to be a "sense maker," they will need to be able to learn and practice how to make sense of real work situations which are often if not always emotionally charged. This desire to have our students engage in restorative justice workshops was relayed to our administration, but there was never any sort of follow up and we never heard from that organization again.

References

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