Traditional Classroom Management Versus Student-Centered Classroom Management

By Eric Toshalis, EdD

Choosing what and how to teach is a complicated endeavor, matched in its complexity with how one chooses to "manage" the learning environment.

In every class period, teachers face innumerable decision points that influence the extent to which students will apply their best effort and take care of one another. Sometimes those decisions lift everyone to new heights of insight, achievement and community, and other times they take the air out of the room. Knowing which strategies to use is a key skillset in the art and science of good teaching.

Traditional classroom management and student-centered approaches are often at odds with one another because they seek different objectives: the former often desiring control and compliance and the latter typically prioritizing student agency and growth. To help educators and leaders make sense of these differences and choose the approaches most likely to elevate outcomes, we have articulated key distinctions in the table below. Each is paired with quoted insights from leaders in the field.

Overall, our interviews with nine different competency-based innovators made it clear that we need to make the shift away from tired, old and often problematic disciplinary practices toward student-centered classroom management, especially when implementing personalized, competency-based learning. Fortunately, these shifts are not only possible — they're already happening.

Example Comparisons

TRADITIONAL CLASSROOM	STUDENT-CENTERED CLASSROOM
Prioritize control and compliance	Focus on engagement, inspiration, learning, growing, belonging, self-regulation and competency

WHAT EXPERTS SAY

"Creating student ownership is the biggest thing. Kids go through school with adults telling them what to know, do and how to behave. So much telling. It's disempowering. They're taught not to own it." — Hector Estrada

"A teacher once told me: 'The more control I give to kids, the more they thrive.' So many educators are afraid of their kids and seek control and compliance over student self-efficacy and self-determination. But ownership and self-direction win every time." — Jonathan Vander Els

"Competency-based learning leaves ample space for social-emotional learning integration, checking in on how students are doing and how they're feeling about a specific thing, a challenge, etc. Procedures should be about students learning to regulate their own behavior, not about control and compliance." — Robin Kanaan

TRADITIONAL CLASSROOM	STUDENT-CENTERED CLASSROOM
Dominate, supervise and constrain	Promote agency, inspire effort, facilitate inquiry and support skill-building

WHAT EXPERTS SAY

"All roads start at agency. It's literally all about agency." — Robin Kanaan

"The best classroom management is engaging learning. The mastery-autonomy-purpose intersection is optimized in competency-based learning. There's agency in the learning. Do this well and you'll already be handling 97 percent of your classroom management problems."
— Karen Perry

"What decisions are we making for kids that they can make for themselves?" — Robin Kanaan

TRADITIONAL CLASSROOM	STUDENT-CENTERED CLASSROOM
Demand obedience	Build ownership

WHAT EXPERTS SAY

"Not 'We're doing this because I said so,' but because 'We're a community and it's good for us.'"
— Jonathan Vander Els

"Separating what students can know and do from their behaviors is key in competency-based learning. Never do 10 points off for late work or extra credit for bringing supplies—obedience is not learning!" — Karen Perry

"Competency-based approaches move teachers from control and compliance to engagement and inspiration. It shifts to choice and agency. There's no need to berate kids and yell at them to conform." — Robin Kanaan

TRADITIONAL CLASSROOM	STUDENT-CENTERED CLASSROOM
Manipulate	Cultivate

WHAT EXPERTS SAY

"Point/reward systems need to be challenged. They cheapen the learning environment."
— Jonathan Vander Els

"You have to understand how to co-build a classroom culture and climate. There should be a feeling in that room—what do you want it to be?" — Hector Estrada

"Relationships are key. Personalizing the discipline is key. It must be meaningful and connected to the unique student in front of you. Need to ask: How can I help the student get to a new competency in their behavioral decision making? What's going on in the child's life? What can we use, build on, enhance? And keep in mind that what works for one kiddo may not work for another kiddo." — Mimi Renteria

TRADITIONAL CLASSROOM	STUDENT-CENTERED CLASSROOM
Teacher as chief disciplinary officer	Teacher as compassionate coach

WHAT EXPERTS SAY

"We need to move away from control and toward care. We need to teach respect and care for others, not compliance. School signage and missions need to reflect this. Not 'Don't run' but 'Move with care.' Refaming is needed everywhere. Discussion and debate are healthy and should be encouraged. "Take care of this space" instead of "Don't eat in the library." Shift responsibility to the kids, to practice. And make mistakes. We need to remember that relationships are in the repair, and you have to practice community. 'We keep us safe' communicates so much."
— Carla Shalaby

"You may think your role is to be the superhero or SWAT team who cruises in to handle it all, but in competency-based learning you need to become a coach." — Robin Kanaan

"Teachers have to be okay with letting go of power. To truly give choice means we have to fade, we have to be really planned out in how we do that. Co-creating clear expectations and norms builds relationship." — Hector Estrada

TRADITIONAL CLASSROOM	STUDENT-CENTERED CLASSROOM
Believe that students won't apply themselves unless forced and therefore use surveillance to scan for troublemakers, catch students misbehaving and impose order	Trust students to apply themselves productively and take care of each other when sufficiently supported

WHAT EXPERTS SAY

"This is not whack-a-mole classroom management where the objective is to catch problems. Classroom management has to start with compelling learning opportunities. You also need a classroom culture of care, flatter power structures and a sense among all in the environment that we are all learners and have a part to play. And make sure you have additional structural supports for kids who have deep needs not met in good instruction." — Karen Perry

"There's a sense that only certain kids can be successful in competency-based learning environments. But how are they ever going to learn if we don't give them the opportunity? [Not trusting students] is a convenient excuse." — Theresa Ewald

"My favorite remark from teacher after they've implemented competency-based strategies is, 'I never thought kids could do this.'" — Robin Kanaan

TRADITIONAL CLASSROOM	STUDENT-CENTERED CLASSROOM
Issue threats, public rebukes and reprimands in an attempt to coerce students to learn content	Offer ample opportunities to try out new social, relational and collaborative skills and use modeling, encouragements and reminders to focus students on growth

WHAT EXPERTS SAY

"Kids come to school wanting it to be good! They have ideas about what it should look/sound/feel like. When students feel valued and all of their basic needs are being met, you've got 'em! They won't need to be managed or disciplined. They'll be too engaged and busy."
— Robin Kanaan

"I also see kids correcting kids in our competency-based learning environment more than I've seen it anywhere else. It's considered 'our school' so kids are quick to say, "Don't screw this up for us, man!'" — Theresa Ewald

"[One school's driving outcome is simply] 'grow.' Show you're improving. Show you're getting better. No work, no effort means no growth. 'Grow' is an outcome not applied onto kids by adults—it's about kids. It's innate human desire. Competency-based education and classroom management come together in growth." — Joy Nolan

TRADITIONAL CLASSROOM	STUDENT-CENTERED CLASSROOM
Stigmatize behavioral mistakes as character flaws by publicly calling students out and/or sending them away	Use behavioral mistakes to "call students in" where the goals are to better understand student needs, offer opportunities to learn and practice pro-social skills, holding students and adults accountable for productive contribution and improving individual and collective outcomes

WHAT EXPERTS SAY

"Schools are still using the assertive discipline systems! Are you kidding me?" — Robin Kanaan

"Every misbehavior is a learning experience. Debrief like crazy to get to root causes, dig in and figure it out. There is never [a behavior] that is an outlier — we need to not be so rigid, to expect deviance, expect mistakes, expect kids being kids. Teach them to advocate then err on the side of giving [agency] to them, then check in on impact and effects. Our role is not to destroy kids — everybody is redeemable." — Cory Steiner

"We have a four-step process to address misbehavior.

1. One-on-one conference with student, and document it — what I learned, what I will do next, for teacher and student.
2. Timely follow-up conversation, usually at lunch, to check on progress.
3. If problem persists, call home and partner with family.
4. If problem still persists, then give a referral, which is support-based.

School administration then has the autonomy to act, which usually results in a plan and a teacher-student facilitated conversation. There are no direct referrals to the office as the first step." — Hector Estrada

TRADITIONAL CLASSROOM	STUDENT-CENTERED CLASSROOM
Believe that students require rewards and punishments to comply with expectations, and deploy extrinsic manipulations, including trinkets, candy, grades, participation points, free time, movies, etc. to compel their deference	Believe that students can and will try and succeed when presented with challenges they value, and trust that the ability to develop and demonstrate competency in a community that supports everyone's growth is a powerful intrinsic motivator

WHAT EXPERTS SAY

"Punitive approaches don't work and they undermine agency. For example, kicking a kid out of class shows the kid you don't like them. Kids see unfair treatment and they know when it's happening. They're trying to figure out fair and unfair and they're attuned to it. Raw power moves conflict with the ideals of competency-based learning, they strip the learning of agency."
— Jonathan Vander Els

"Once you stop using grades for rewards and punishments, you need to do the same thing with classroom management. There are so many other powerful ways to induce students to take care of each other." — Joy Nolan

"We still tend to prefer highly paced and regimented practices, pacing guides, plus narrow definitions of how students demonstrate mastery. All of that takes agency out of the equation. In teacher-oriented and direct instruction, kids don't pay attention. This sets up a power struggle. So teachers set up competitions for attention, grades, rewards, etc. But competition is not a good motivator—it only works if you think you have a chance to win. So they set up sticks and carrots, clip charts, assertive discipline shaming, etc. but human don't respond well to this. Even PBIS work is leading folks in that direction when acknowledging good behavior can warp into sticks and carrots. We must move on from these old paradigms!" — Karen Perry

TRADITIONAL CLASSROOM	STUDENT-CENTERED CLASSROOM
Assign students to detention, give suspensions or issue other forms of ostracism believing that exclusion and isolation will convince the student of the error of their ways	Keep students close, ensure a sense of belonging and include them in the design of the response and return

WHAT EXPERTS SAY

"Any system that removes kids from the learning environment runs contrary to competency-based learning." — Robin Kanaan

"Ask the kids why [they chose to act that way]. Too many people do not, or they stop at how. Ask, 'What do you need right now to give yourself a chance to reset?' Key framing here is 'reset,' with the student co-designing it." — Cory Steiner

"What are the teachers who don't give referrals or suspend kids doing in their classrooms? I guarantee it's about the high levels of engagement they promote, not power 'over you, but 'with you.' This is not a free for all—there are plenty of guardrails still." — Robin Kanaan

TRADITIONAL CLASSROOM	STUDENT-CENTERED CLASSROOM
When problems arise, teacher explains them to students and sets new rules unilaterally	Behavioral challenges are reframed as design projects, with students co-creating solutions and testing their effectiveness

WHAT EXPERTS SAY

"If you want to align [class norms to the needs of the day], ask the kids. Work with them to figure out the best strategies. [You don't need] overall rules; you just need rules based on what's happening in the room that day. Talk with students about what's best for their learning—they will nail it." — Cory Steiner

"If a dilemma or problem is located, like after recess or lunch, make it a design challenge. Put students in charge of gathering data, analyzing it together, supplying solutions and rapid prototyping until one sticks. Kids own it, teacher facilitates it. Put kids in charge of their community and they will take care of it!… You still need transitions and procedures and the skills in setting those up and managing/improving them. But when kids own their learning they own their behavior, so there is no reason why we shouldn't involve them as co-designers and co-supporters of these moves. Teachers tell me all the time, 'I stepped back and my students stepped right in.'" — Robin Kanaan

TRADITIONAL CLASSROOM	STUDENT-CENTERED CLASSROOM
Police and punish, "hold students accountable"	Learn and grow, share and deepen collective responsibility

WHAT EXPERTS SAY

"Accountability must be taught and practiced: noticing and naming a harm; repairing meaningfully; noticing patterns in behavior that may lead to harm again. These are teachable skills, same as reading and math. They can be mastered. Classroom management typically does not require learning – it's policing and punishing." — Carla Shalaby

"Behavioral issues tell us students are not engaged. Compensating for lack of engagement with more punishment is a losing proposition." — Mimi Renteria

"We need to move away from models of authoritarian accountability and toward accountability to others, to the community. There is no such thing as holding another person accountable. If you look at definitions of accountability from transformative justice, what accountability means in that context is a series of steps that include naming the act and taking responsibility. Punishment de-incentivizes kids from this. It keeps kids in the deny phase and encourages a defensive posture. Punishment is incompatible with genuine accountability. 'I have to have a consequence to have accountability' is backwards thinking. We need new forms of accountability – accountability to others, to community, to the planet, to a sustainable future." — Carla Shalaby

TRADITIONAL CLASSROOM	STUDENT-CENTERED CLASSROOM
Cast student complaints aside	Regularly solicit student feedback and integrate what is learned into new or revised routines and practices

WHAT EXPERTS SAY

"Meeting the students where they're at is more than giving them a voice. It's what you do after that. For example, what do you do with student feedback? It's their school – I just work here. Personalized, competency-based learning provides true agency. They're not empty buckets." — Hector Estrada

"Feedback structures are key: likes and wonders, exit tickets, etc. Put students' meta-cognitive skills to work on the classroom community. This blends instruction and management."
— Karen Perry

"Use red/yellow/green signs to indicate readiness/feelings. Put feedback prompts on posters for quick reference. Examples: class-closing questions, exit tickets, 'What is something I learned today?' 'What is something I need help with or have questions about?'" — Hector Estrada

TRADITIONAL CLASSROOM	STUDENT-CENTERED CLASSROOM
"My way or the highway"	"Our learning community"

WHAT EXPERTS SAY

"We're done programming kids to make one person happy. It's about making the community"
— Theresa Ewald

"Classroom management is a model for how you use power. What will you create space for? How will you facilitate community? Reframe it!" — Carla Shalaby

"The best managed classrooms are the ones with the most engaging learning opportunities, where kids felt they had an important role in the class and felt they had relationships and were part of a community. They were engaged meaningfully as stakeholders. It is instructional and relational techniques that make classroom management easier and more successful, when kids are being met where they are." — Jonathan Vander Els

TRADITIONAL CLASSROOM	STUDENT-CENTERED CLASSROOM
Blame students for "willful defiance," use "stink eye" to nonverbally communicate anger, deliver behavioral lectures, administer scoldings	Understand that all (mis)behavior is behavior that arises from a particular context and therefore seek to understand and hold oneself accountable for features in that learning environment that may influence problematic behaviors

WHAT EXPERTS SAY

"It's not the behavior; it's the triggers. Look at the antecedents. Don't build carrots and sticks. Have kids build plans for their own development." — Theresa Ewald

"Reframe the [behavioral] issue. Get accurate about the causalities, the context, not just the behaviors." — Joy Nolan

"Giving everyone the same exact punishment regardless of the context is the opposite of personalization…Teachers who don't take the time to speak with the student about why the behavior occurred break the relationship with the student. Students need to be heard, especially when there is conflict in the classroom." — Mimi Renteria

TRADITIONAL CLASSROOM	STUDENT-CENTERED CLASSROOM
Teacher-decreed rules and consequences	Class-generated norms and agreements

WHAT EXPERTS SAY

"Establish norms as a group, for each class period. Get the 'we' approach first, then you can teach agency in that structure. In the first week of school there should be little to no content, little instruction. It should be all about building relationships and common understandings and procedures. Come up with learning environment designs together. The most important thing early on is to establish community norms and generate buy in." — Hector Estrada

"Develop classroom rules with the students. Ask: 'What does a good teacher do?' Students set expectations based on their answers to that question. Then ask the same question of students: 'What does a good student do?'" — Mimi Renteria

"We can and should be co-constructing criteria for behavior, articulating norms with not for kids, showing each other what various types of communities look like and teaching how to move through early levels of skill-building to mastery levels. — Robin Kanaan

TRADITIONAL CLASSROOM	STUDENT-CENTERED CLASSROOM
Pretending behavioral norms are above critique and should be considered final once posted	Always looking for ways to revise and improve how a community governs itself

WHAT EXPERTS SAY

"Norms on the wall that are never revisited can be problematic. It's like a mission of a school – should be embedded in everything and frequently used to calibrate and revise approaches. It's not about the norms but about what happens with it. Does everyone understand them? Are they applying them? Do they own the norms as part of what it means to be a member of a community?" — Jonathan Vander Els

"Don't we all want to spark a fire instead of fill a bucket? We're producing whole humans who need to know how to learn and build community. Celebrate when it works and spread that joy!" — Karen Perry

"Co-create behavior expectations with the kids. 'What do we need to have shared understandings of?' Co-create and continually revise those. Release teachers from the expectation that they have to have all the answers." — Theresa Ewald

TRADITIONAL CLASSROOM	STUDENT CENTERED CLASSROOM
Favor White middle-class cultural dominance and communicate discriminatory standards of behavior based on skewed notions of "respect," "politeness," "care," "safety" and "comfort"	Learn, apply and constantly update culturally-responsive and sustaining practices that position students as cultural experts capable of co-creating learning environments characterized by plurality, democracy, authenticity and affirmation

WHAT EXPERTS SAY

"Culturally responsive pedagogies are crucial in competency-based learning and in classroom management. They shift focus from the kids' behaviors to the teacher's capacity to understand those behaviors." — Robin Kanaan

"Every kid has their own story. They bring a lot to that room that day. They carry a lot more than a backpack. Access and use it. Meet them where they're at." — Hector Estrada

"Culturally-responsive instruction is one thing, but setting up the structures to build community and trust are next level. Anchor practices include: circles, co-building norms, one-on-one conferences, student committees, etc. We're not competing for power – it's shared responsibility and power. If teachers don't approach their classroom with these expectations, then they're already selling kids short." — Karen Perry

KnowledgeWorks is a national nonprofit organization advancing a future of learning that ensures each student graduates ready for what's next. For more than 20 years, we've been partnering with states, communities and leaders across the country to imagine, build and sustain vibrant learning communities. Through evidence-based practices and a commitment to equitable outcomes, we're creating the future of learning, together.

KnowledgeWorks