1

Creating the Right Environment

North Carolina High School Classroom: Entering a high school science classroom, I find it hard to locate the teacher because the room is a buzz of activity as she and her students work together on physics projects. It is a student who greets me at the door, explains what he and the other students are trying to accomplish, shows me his extensive data portfolio, and introduces me to his teacher. The teacher takes a moment to show me the data charts on the wall, along with a great many visual displays created by her students. She explains that a low grade is unacceptable, and students continue to problem-solve and make improvements (with the help of fellow students who understand the material) until the grade goes up. I take a picture for posterity and travel from group to group within the classroom. Some students are standing, and others are seated on stools, but everyone is engaged in the lesson.

Virginia High School Classroom: Working with a group of high school seniors, I meander around the room listening in on conversations taking place at four different locations where the students discuss the questions posted on various charts and record their collective responses. Music serves as a backdrop for their conversations. I observe all four groups in turn and,

once all four charts have been visited in sequence by everyone in the room, each group's spokesperson reports out on the charted information. Others in the groups have an opportunity to add to what was recorded and reported. I ask a few questions in order to delve a bit deeper into some of the charted data. When the activity is finished, the students return to their seats to the accompaniment of Respect, *by Aretha Franklin. I ask them what they enjoyed most about the class. These seniors loved collaborating with each other and "being treated like adults." It does not take long for one of them to point out to me (a guest teacher for the ninety-minute block) that they have done a lot of passive observing over their years in school.*

Virginia Fifth-Grade Classroom: *I enter a fifth-grade classroom from which the student desks have been removed. Tables placed around the perimeter of the classroom open up more space for movement in the room's center. The students sing a divisibility cadence. In fact, music is used all day long to manage process. The Ray Charles tune* Hit the Road Jack *triggers movement as students clean up, pack up, and ponder their "hit the road" checklists. Roy Orbison's* Pretty Woman *means "Line up!" The kids move purposefully over a "letters hopscotch" area on the floor. Physical or mental state change techniques are used every few minutes, and celebrations are frequent. Worksheets have been outlawed. Students make up songs about content material and sing them as loudly as possible. They share, they move, they laugh, they dance . . . and they learn. Their classroom and standardized test scores are unbelievably high and they truly love school.*

Boston Seminar: *I walk into a room filled with colorful posters and upbeat music, and I sit in a chair. (There are no tables.) No sooner am I seated than the seminar facilitator has us stand, gets us moving, and gets us sharing. This goes on for just short of five days, all to the accompaniment of music of every sort. Brief periods of direct instruction are always followed by opportunities to process the information, helping us to create new understandings. The five days fly by quickly and painlessly . . . and the experience illuminates for me the way I learn and, subsequently, changes the way I teach.*

Above we have four different classroom settings, four completely different lessons, and four different instructors. These (true) classroom tableaus have at least two things in common: The students were active participants in their own learning, and the teacher or seminar leader *facilitated process*. Additionally, in each case the students did eighty percent of the work while the teacher, in a supportive and consultative role, did the remaining twenty.

In the first example of the science classroom, the class mantra was "continuous improvement." This wasn't just a catch phrase, but a way

of doing business for those students and their teacher. The portfolio that student showed me contained, among other things, a run chart of his grades over the course of the semester. He knew at every point during the semester exactly how much he had improved. There was a class run chart on the wall that showed progress over time. On occasions when the class average went down, the student explained to me, the whole class *engaged in a discussion* as to what might have caused the decline and what could be done to bring the grade average back up. At times when the grades went up, they discussed why that happened as well. Continuous improvement and collaboration reigned. Movement and conversation were built into the lesson plan. Interdependence was the order of the day, and at the *end* of the day, *the teacher and her students were all tired because they had all been engaged during the course of the block.*

Near the end of that high school science class, I had the opportunity to ask some questions of the students as we gathered on stools around one of the black science tables. My first question centered on why they seemed to love this particular class. The answers came quickly and in a torrent, but they all communicated essentially the same thing. Most of their classes, they said, were boring. In most cases they sat passively and listened to the teacher talk for the entire class period; students falling asleep in class was not an uncommon occurrence. *But in that science class they were involved.* The teacher's role (and those students understood her role completely) was to provide a classroom structure that engaged them in their own learning.

She had created an environment where the students could think out loud, collaborate on a regular basis, and make mistakes without fear of being ridiculed by anyone. The students had helped create the class rules at the beginning of the year, and it was apparent that they both understood and followed them. Entering the classroom each day, her students shifted from passive to active for a ninety-minute block, *and they liked it*. They were proud of their teacher and proud of their involvement; they knew the teacher valued them, their opinions, and their progress.

Too often, student thinking is not valued (Brooks & Brooks, 1999).

> When asking students questions, most teachers seek not to enable students to think through intricate issues, but to discover whether students know the 'right' answers. Consequently, students quickly learn not to raise their hands in response to a teacher's question unless they are confident they already know the sought-after response. (p. 7)

What we may characterize as "teacher talk" dominates many classrooms and, according to Brooks and Brooks, "In a flowchart of

classroom communication, most of the arrows point to or away from the teacher. Student-initiated questions and student-to-student inter-actions are atypical" (p. 6). Yet we know that "[r]egardless of the topic or task, small-group discussion reinforces classroom learning, assists the brain in recalling the information, and allows students to solve problems collaboratively and explore topics in depth" (Alexopoulou & Driver, 1996, in Tate, 2003, p. 2).

In addition to the complaint that they can't keep their students quiet, secondary teachers often complain (as I once did) that they can't get their students to sit still for long periods of time. There is a reason for this. Students have a basic need to *move*! Sitting still for a fifty-five-minute class period or a ninety-minute block would be tough for most *adults*. Our job as teachers is to provide a structure within which movement can be *channeled*, not suppressed. In plan-ning lessons, teachers need to take into account the VAK Predicates: visual, auditory, and kinesthetic. As learners we possess all these to varying degrees, but our classrooms (particularly secondary) are often geared toward the first two and may ignore the third. Speaking of those who are kinesthetic learners, Sprenger (2002) laments that "[r]ows of chairs, sitting still, and being quiet do not allow these stu-dents' brains to become activated" (p. 77).

Meeting with those high school science students convinced me of the efficacy of the active classroom. The students liked it because they were immersed in a student-centered environment diametrically opposed to the teacher-centered environments they disliked and would have avoided had they a choice. College students with whom I talk tell much the same story. They dislike lecture when it is the sole method of delivery and appreciate being involved in their own learn-ing in an active manner.

So we seem to be left with a clear mandate (if we listen to the research and the students). We need to create classroom environ-ments where *discussion* between and among students is the norm, where the students' need for *movement* is honored, and where the teacher's role is to *build relationships* and *manage process* in a climate conducive to interaction and learning.

The active classroom can be a wonderful place, but it does not *just happen*. In fact, it will not happen at all unless the teacher does what is necessary for students to feel comfortable with collaborative activ-ities that include discussion and movement. A great deal of prepara-tion is necessary if students are to feel safe sharing their thoughts, opinions, and ideas. Establishing procedures and routines, research-

ing structures for communication, providing consistently high expectations, approaching discipline issues with the right mindset, providing clear instructions and directions, and building rapport and trust are all necessary in order to make it possible for effective and meaningful interaction to occur.

Procedures and Routines

The high school science class and the fifth-grade classroom I described at the beginning of this chapter shared two additional important characteristics, and it did not take me long in either case to conclude this through observation. First, well-established procedures and routines were in evidence. Second, there were no discipline issues that were apparent during my visits—and both the students and the teachers indicated that discipline problems were virtually non-existent. My own reflective experience over almost four decades in education has taught me that the first helps make the second possible; i.e., in classrooms where process is paramount, half the battle is won and there are *few discipline issues*. Much of the rest of the battle is won by building relationships. In talking to the high school science students that day, it was apparent that their teacher had done just that. The degree of mutual respect and trust was evident in their words and their behavior during the class. When students are actively and happily engaged in their own learning, there is little time and even less motivation for doing the kinds of things that in more passive classrooms would get them into trouble.

According to Wong and Wong (2005), "The number one problem in the classroom is not discipline; it is the lack of procedures and routines" (p. 167). We are not talking about discipline or rules here. We are concerned with process. Wong and Wong provide a useful distinction between discipline and procedures: "**DISCIPLINE** concerns how students *BEHAVE*. **PROCEDURES** concern how things *ARE DONE*" (p. 169). The teacher who incorporates well-established procedures into her teaching will still need rules and consequences, but will have to refer to them or use them far less often.

In preparing for the school year, then, teachers must become process-oriented and think backwards from the vision. If a teacher envisions an active classroom in which students are purposefully engaged in structured discussion and movement, then she must consider what processes will effectively and smoothly facilitate that vision.

Here are some procedure-related questions that will impact the interactive classroom and need to be answered before the semester begins:

What will be the classroom procedure for:

- getting the students' attention when they are talking or working on an activity and it is time to bring them back?
- communicating with a substitute teacher in advance (when that is possible) so that things run smoothly while you are absent?
- sharpening a pencil?
- assigning homework?
- handing in homework?
- providing students with feedback?
- establishing discussion pairs or groups?
- recording information or data on a chart or on the board?
- collecting (and distributing) assignments or materials?
- leaving to go to the restroom during class?
- class dismissal? (My students learned to ignore the bell and wait for my signal.)
- dealing with students who show disrespect for each other or for the teacher?
- asking a question of them? (How much wait time will you provide?)
- answering a student's question? (Again, how much wait time will you provide?)
- straightening and cleaning the room (*them*, not you) at the end of the class period or school day?
- dealing with emergencies (lockdowns, fire drills, etc.)?

None of these questions relate directly to subject-area content. They are *process* questions, but if they (and others) are not answered, any classroom can become a shambles. Smith (2004) likens procedures to railroad tracks, with content as the train. If the track is laid well, the train will run smoothly (p. 82). Some of the questions in the above list may seem trivial, but any veteran teacher will tell you not one is unimportant. Taking the time to decide exactly what those procedures will be is certain to pay dividends later on in the school year.

Not only should the teacher *establish* procedures, but, according to Wong and Wong (2005), they must be practiced so that they become routine. Their three-step process involves first explaining the procedure, then rehearsing it, and finally reinforcing it with appropriate praise or, if it is not done correctly or quickly enough, rehearsing it again *until it becomes routine* (pp. 174–176). One reason this is so important is that students have many other teachers who have their own

unique classroom procedures. If a student goes home at the end of the first day of school with six or seven sets of procedures competing for a place in his long-term memory, the second day is bound to bring confusion as he tries to remember which teachers require what procedures.

Unless the routines are well-established in a classroom, students will find it difficult to make the right choice every time. It is understandable that, left to their own devices or in the absence of clear, practiced procedures; students can—and will—get into trouble. Combine students who are in a passive mode for too long with the absence of established and practiced procedures, and even the most innocent act can lead to difficulty.

As an example, let us consider the pencil sharpener. A wonderful invention, to be sure, and still necessary today despite a spate of laptops. The seemingly innocuous pencil sharpener can be a flashpoint for a very good reason. Let me illustrate with a story that may strike a chord with middle or high school teachers.

> *Picture young Eddie sitting quietly in his seat near the classroom windows. His notebook is open, and his pencil is in his hand, but his mind wanders. He has been sitting listening to a lecture on something or other for perhaps twenty minutes. Eddie is restless and bored. Moreover, he knows there is a full half-hour left in the class period...and then his eyes make contact with the pencil sharpener, a legitimate destination for a student if ever there was one. Eddie's frontal lobe begins to function again as he works out the approximate distance and the available routes. He is not aware of any official policy for sharpening the pencil in this classroom, but a trip to the pencil sharpener certainly seems justified, since his pencil is dull and taking notes is, he reasons, important. Others, on occasion, have made the trip without comment from the teacher, although he can remember the teacher stopping once and staring pointedly at Marty all the way to the sharpener. Might get the stare, then, but a definite plus for the trip is that the route he has mapped out will take him past Betsy. It also takes him past his archenemy, Tony, but passing Betsy in the process makes it worth throwing the dice. He gets up, heads for the sharpener, gets tripped by Tony, falls over Betsy's desk . . . well, you get the idea.*

Suffice to say, then, that the consequences for not establishing, explaining, rehearsing, and reinforcing basic procedures can interfere with or effectively prevent the smooth functioning of the classroom, active or otherwise. The active classroom has at least *one powerful advantage* for anyone who has Eddie and a pencil sharpener in the same room. Eddie's original reason for going to the pencil sharpener

had nothing whatsoever to do with his pencil, his notes, or the lecture. He had been sitting for twenty minutes, and he needed to move. His brain's cortex went to work not on the lecture content, but on *how he could get up and* GO *somewhere*. The pencil sharpener just happened to come into his line of sight.

In an active classroom, Eddie would not have found himself sitting still for twenty minutes. He would have been up, moving around, and sharing with someone (maybe even Betsy) a good deal sooner. As we will see in Chapter 4, music might have been playing in the background as he moved to meet with a partner or a small group. The whole trip to the pencil sharpener and its consequences amounted to a symptom of two larger problems: *the lack of established, practiced, and completely familiar procedures and routines, and too much seat time.*

Building Relationships

Another important component of an active classroom is the existence of strong rapport between the teacher and the students, along with effective working relationships among the students in the class. There is a tendency today, given the pressure of high-stakes testing, for teachers to want to begin teaching content on the first day of school. The opportunity cost of that approach becomes apparent later in the year, when the lack of attention to up-front relationship-building results in student misbehavior, at which point the teacher begins to look for ways to "control" the behavior. Bluestein (1999) reminds us that "working to build a positive classroom climate—even if temporarily at the expense of the curriculum—can help us avoid being sabotaged by negative attitudes, weak learning behaviors and unrealistic self-expectations as well" (p. 35).

Rogers & Renard (1999) affirm that "[s]tudents are motivated when they believe that teachers treat them like people and care about them personally and educationally. [Teachers need to] foster relationships that help students see teachers as teachers and not as dictators, judges, juries, or enemies" (p. 34). Having worked with over 50,000 students in the U.S., the Netherlands, and Australia over a fifteen-year period, Wubbels, Levy, and Brekelmans (1997) came to the conclusion that "relationship-building is a prerequisite to a positive classroom climate. Without this piece of the repertoire, teachers cannot fully develop in their practice" (p. 85). Teachers need to constantly

and consistently work at developing relationships with students and their parents from the very beginning of the school year.

I recently heard the story of a new teacher at the first faculty meeting of the year. The principal apparently asked the teachers to call several of their students' parents *per week* for the first several weeks of school. What she *heard* was a mandate to call several parents *each day* for the first several days. When he came to observe her classroom in early October, he commented on the excellent behavior of the students. She admitted that she had misunderstood his original request, but credited a good deal of her success with discipline to the multitude of phone calls she made that first week. She built relationships from day one, and it paid off. She was making dozens of "relationship deposits" early in the year against the day when she might have to make "withdrawals." She no doubt found that making a difficult phone call to a parent in November was made easier by having built a relationship in August or September.

Making large numbers of phone calls early in the year has other benefits as well. In my first year at Plaza Middle in Virginia Beach, I called a great many parents in the week prior to the first day of school. Those students, of course, knew very well I had begun calling parents, and the word got around. A wonderful thing happened. Other students began to ask when I was going to make the call to their homes. They knew, you see, that my calls had been positive and untainted by any previous problems between their former teachers and their parents or guardians. The students were in a hurry to establish a positive relationship with a teacher who seemed eager to get things off on the right foot. Using the week *before the students came back to school* to make those positive contacts with parents paid great dividends during the year.

By making those positive phone calls, teachers looking forward to the active-classroom experience model the kind of relationship-building they want the students to mimic in order to make discussion and collaboration successful. Attitude is critical in a smooth-running classroom, and modeling is everything. Teachers who demonstrate by their actions that relationship-building is important to them and to the effective operation of the classroom environment have a much better chance of making it all work. This also means letting students see positive relationships between their teachers and others on the school faculty and staff.

Students who observe negative behavior on the part of the teacher can conclude that negative behavior is perfectly acceptable in that teacher's classroom. A teacher who loses her temper consistently

should expect students in her classroom to lose theirs. Jones (2007) provides teachers with a maxim that is essential for success in any classroom: "Calm is strength, Upset is weakness" (p. 180).

Any teacher working with students of any age will be faced with conflict that requires problem-solving skills and/or a decision. The teacher who gets upset will downshift from the cortex to the brainstem (Burke, 2008). In the brainstem, problem-solving and decision-making are no longer possible, although the teacher desperately needs to be able to think clearly and act responsibly. According to Jones,

> [w]hen you are calm, you can bring all of your wisdom, experience, and social skill to bear in solving a problem. When you become *upset* and downshift, none of that knowledge or wisdom is available to you. As the saying goes, ***My life is in the hands of any fool who can make me angry***. (p. 180)

Interaction among students can lead to opportunities for disagreement between partners in a discussion or other collaborative activities. Risking this kind of frequent interaction means that the teacher must model remaining calm and avoid getting upset in the face of conflict. It may mean pausing and breathing deliberately a couple of times before proceeding. The breathing causes the teacher to relax and, according to Bailey (2001), "Conscious, slow deep breathing brings more oxygen to our lungs and our brains for greater clarity, calmness and energy" (p. 40).

In building relationships, one tool that is often misused, yet should not be overlooked, is praise. Todd Whitaker (2004) credits Ben Bissell (1992) with a description of five things that make praise more effective. Praise must be, according to Bissell, authentic, specific, immediate, clean, and private (pp. 46–47). The last descriptor is particularly important in the classroom. Some students do not like public praise and praising someone who likes their accolades delivered in private may be a demotivator. There is a business maxim called the Platinum Rule, which says that we should do to others as they would have done to themselves. This is true of praise. I once had a supervisor who asked us each how we liked being praised, publicly or privately, and *honored our choice at every turn*. All this is important in the functioning of the interactive classroom, since cooperation is critical in the collaborative environment. Praising publicly a student who does not appreciate that may cause him or her to shut down for a long time, maybe for the rest of the year.

Teachers will often give praise in phrases like "Good job!" or "Excellent work!" Praise that is this general is less effective than praise that is specific. According to Costa (2008), "What makes an act 'good' or 'excellent' must be communicated along with the praise. Thereby, the student understands the reason or criteria that make the act acceptable and thus the performance can be repeated" (p. 214). (See Figure 1.1)

Figure 1.1   Examples of Praise: Inappropriate and Appropriate

Example 1—Inappropriate Praise	Example 1—Appropriate Praise
The teacher passes by Tony's desk while students are working and slaps Tony on the back, saying, "Great work on your essay, Tony!"	The teacher crouches next to Tony while students are working and says quietly, "Tony, I just gave you some feedback on the essay you turned in this morning and I noticed that your verb-subject agreement was correct in every paragraph. That is a definite improvement from last week's essay. I thought you might want to know."
In the situation above, the praise is general, and no really helpful feedback is given to Tony. The reason for the praise may remain a mystery forever, or at least until the essay is returned.	In the example above, the teacher gives Tony some specific feedback from the essay. The feedback may be cause for a bit of celebration on Tony's part, and it may ensure that Tony looks for verb-subject agreement in the future.
Example 2—Inappropriate Praise	**Example 2—Appropriate Praise**
The teacher stops class and has everyone applaud Tina because her grade over the last two similar assignments improved one full letter grade. Tina turns red and covers her face with her hands.	While students are working quietly on an in-class assignment, the teacher motions for Tina to come up front, where, very quietly, he informs her of the good news . . . that her grades are steadily improving. He also gives several concrete reasons for her improvement over time.
This is inappropriate if Tina is the kind of person who hates public praise. Before giving praise publicly, a teacher should know that the object of the praise is okay with it.	The praise here is not only private, but specific. It also gives Tina a chance to ask some questions, but quietly and with no chance of anyone overhearing the discussion.

A teacher, then, must be consistently positive and work *ceaselessly* to build positive relationships. As we have seen, this may begin in late summer with parents and should continue throughout the course of the school year with students and parents alike. Additionally, the teacher must show that remaining calm in the face of conflict or

frustrating situations is the best way to deal with both. Genuine and unceasing efforts to build rapport will help build trust, an essential ingredient in the interactive classroom.

Avoiding Demotivators

In *What to Do with the Kid Who . . .*, Kay Burke (2008), in a chapter dealing with classroom climate, lists twelve teacher behaviors that can quickly and effectively dismantle trust as it erodes the climate of the classroom. Doing these things would be bad enough in a classroom where students are passive observers, but the effect of many of these in an interactive classroom would be like shouting in an echo chamber. The teacher who asks students to share frequently in pairs or groups is asking for trouble if she models inappropriate behavior herself.

In Figure 1.2, I have listed Burke's "Dirty Dozen" in the left column, and I have indicated in the right column what *I believe* would be the effect of these behaviors on a class where students are expected to talk, move, and collaborate frequently (p. 87).

Figure 1.2   Adaptation of Kay Burke's Dirty Dozen "Demotivators"

Behavior	Effect in the Active Classroom
Sarcasm	Students will not only be hurt by such sarcasm on the part of the teacher, but will use it themselves when they meet in pairs or groups. Sarcasm or humiliation from any source will inhibit the kind of student interaction necessary in the active classroom.
Negative tone of voice	This will not only turn students off, but will encourage their own use of such negativity in their own discussions.
Negative body language	Any teacher who is working with students on presentation skills will, at some point, have a discussion on body language. Telling students to be *careful* of negative body language and then *modeling* precisely that reveals inconsistencies that will undermine the effectiveness of any discussions or group collaboration.
Inconsistency	Teaching one thing and modeling something else is an example of an inconsistency that can lead to trouble. Procedures need to be consistent as well.

Behavior	Effect in the Active Classroom
Favoritism	In a classroom where the teacher may ask students to scribe or perform other procedural duties, calling on the same person all the time will backfire.
Put-downs	Insulting students (intentionally or not) will erode trust and, once again, set the stage for students to do the same thing when they are in pairs or groups.
Outbursts	Even short bursts of temper model inappropriate behavior, and such outbursts serve to make the other students in the room feel unsafe. If the behavior is repeated, the fact that they could be the next recipient of an outburst or tirade may never be far from their minds.
Public Reprimands	If needed, reprimands should be administered in private. The interactive classroom requires students to talk and share frequently. Being humiliated by the teacher will lead to embarrassment that will carry over into the collaborative activities the teacher is working so hard to put in place. It may also be mimicked by students in the class.
Unfairness	As Burke suggests, "Taking away promised privileges; scheduling a surprise test; 'nitpicking' while grading homework or tests; or assigning punitive homework could be construed as 'unfair,'" and the negativism among students is sure to carry over into any of the interactive activities the teacher has planned, with unintended, but predictable, results (p. 91).
Apathy	The teacher in an interactive classroom is in the role of orchestra conductor. Imagine a conductor whose whole demeanor during practice and a performance is apathetic. If the conductor doesn't seem to care, why should the members of the orchestra . . . or the apathetic teacher's students?
Inflexibility	Teachers must be willing to make adjustments in the classroom based on the needs of the students or on changing circumstances that would affect performance if the change or adjustment is not made.
Lack of Humor	Humor is a key ingredient to success in the active classroom. Teachers, as Burke points out, need to be able to laugh at themselves. Being able to do that encourages students who are sharing frequently to do the same. Burke is right on the money when she says that "humorless classes lack energy" (p. 91). I have found that humorless teachers lack energy as well. Teachers do not have to be naturally funny to use humor. Appropriate jokes, funny stories, and self-deprecating humor are all valuable tools.

These demotivators can cause stress levels to rise significantly. Teachers who regularly scold students and use sarcasm, or whose behavior in the classroom is consistently negative, put students in a position where they find it difficult to learn. Sylwester (1995) says that "high cortisol levels can lead to the despair we feel when we've failed" (p. 38). Further, *chronically* high cortisol levels "can lead to the destruction of neurons associated with learning and memory" (p. 38). As Bluestein (2001) points out, students who are continually anxious and stressed-out can be at considerable risk and may choose to simply disengage altogether and finally drop out of school: "Clearly, a stressful school environment interferes with its instructional objectives" (p. 33).

Teachers who are consistently positive and have rid their classrooms of sarcasm, negativity, scolding, threats, and other demotivators will be much more successful in establishing and maintaining a climate conducive to learning.

Safety is of prime concern to students, and not just physical safety. For example, students may not wish to participate in class because they are afraid they do not have the "right answer" they believe the teacher seeks. Part of creating an environment in which students are more likely to willingly participate is letting them know it is perfectly normal and acceptable to "not know all the answers" (Tileston, 2004, p. 30). When she was an elementary teacher, 1999 Virginia Teacher of the Year Linda Koutoufas had a penny jar on her desk to which she regularly contributed when *she* made a mistake. Koutoufas (2007) says she "eventually created a class of risk-takers—students who were not afraid to risk unique and brilliant answers because they knew they would be supported and that, if incorrect, I would take the time to guide them to a correct answer" (p. 117).

I have found that working with students who are not often active participants and allowing them to taste success can set them up to become more engaged and increasingly more successful down the road. A teacher is in a unique position to determine when what a student has written, for example, could be shared with the class to that student's benefit. My suggestion is that when a teacher determines that this is the case, she should first ask the student (quietly) if he would mind sharing it with the entire class. If the student agrees, then have him share at the earliest opportunity as part of a general sharing activity. If the student demurs, tell him that is fine and perhaps he will choose to share later on. Saying, "That is okay; maybe later," lets the student know the teacher will not force him to share, but will continue to ask. If the student *does* share and tastes success, that is one more building block in establishing the active classroom.

Consistent encouragement on the part of the teacher is paramount. Students must know you believe that they can, and will, succeed. In the active classroom, everyone is involved, not just a small and predictable group of regular players. "When you fail to recognize particular students, you can communicate a low level of confidence in their abilities" (Boynton & Boynton, 2005, p. 8). This may mean that teachers have to limit the number of times they call on individuals in class. Grinder (2000) affirms that it is perfectly acceptable *to the rest of the class* for one individual to ask a couple of questions, but "after the same student has asked several questions, the teacher has the class' permission to delay answering the questions" (p. 35). One way of dealing with this situation is to let the student who keeps asking questions—and by so doing, dominate the proceedings—know that there will come a time his or her latest question will be answered, perhaps one-on-one once the class is engaged in something else or after class.

Shifting from passive to active mode, then, involves not inconsiderable risks on the part of students. Before they are willing to participate in the sharing and interpersonal communication that is the life blood of the interactive classroom, kids need to know it is safe for them to do so. It is the job of the teacher to provide that safe environment. Teachers need to be aware of undercurrents of tension or conflict that can distress or hurt children. In the words of Bluestein (2001), "[k]ids need to know that an adult will be there for them, and that we are capable of intervening and supporting them without making things worse. This means learning to listen, pay attention, and take kids seriously in ways that perhaps we never have before" (p. 286).

Creating a plan to help students with very basic social skills may be necessary before students can share with each other effectively and productively. Bosch (2006) suggests that teachers "have students role-play, read books for discussion on social issues and behaviors, or establish a list of positive ways to communicate with one another" (p. 64). Establishing a set of behavioral expectations for pair, group, or class interaction during the first week of school will pay great dividends later in the year, but only if the teacher sees to it that everyone (including herself) lives up to those expectations.

Teachers planning for the upcoming school year and worrying about student misbehavior can take heart from the classrooms described at the beginning of this chapter and from Tate's (2007) observation that any teacher's "best line of defense against behavior problems is that teacher's ability to actively engage students in meaningful and relevant lessons" (p. xiv).

Final Thoughts on Creating the Right Environment

Let's recap for a moment and look at the hypothetical case of a teacher committed to creating an active classroom. During the first weeks of the semester, she has invested heavily in building strong relationships with students and parents alike. Having read Harry and Rosemary Wong's *How to Be an Effective Teacher: The First Days of School* (2005), she has established, explained, rehearsed, and reinforced good procedures until they have become routine. She has worked hard to keep destructive behaviors like sarcasm, negative body language, and public reprimands out of her classroom environment. She has built trust and rapport with students who were initially reluctant to move from a passive to a more active role. By doing all this she has helped her students expand their comfort zones *to the point where pair and group collaboration may be possible*. The signs are positive, and she is eager to get to the content through discussions and group collaboration.

Yet students who may be used to a more passive, traditional environment will need to be moved gently into a highly active format. A middle school teacher recently told me that when she started using music as students entered her classroom, her students initially reacted with comments like, "What *IS* that?" Hearing music play when they entered the classroom was *different* and, for a brief time, took them out of their comfort zone. The teacher let me know she stayed with it, and now they are used to having music played frequently and they are energized by it. She also has few problems with tardiness because their expectation is that the music will be playing when they enter. Teachers can expect "pushback" when attempting to take students from what may be a more traditional and passive mode to a more active one.

The transition to an intensely active environment will require a good deal of preparation and heaps of patience. In Chapter 2 we'll begin to look at what can be done to help students shift from passive to active mode by strengthening their communication skills.