Class meetings propelled by student-generated issues offer practice in hearing another person's point of view.

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It was a typical August day, probably 100 degrees in my classroom. Even first-week-of-school enthusiasm did not disguise the fact that we were hot, tired, and ready for the 3 o'clock bell. As voices began to rise along with the thermostat, I felt my control beginning to slip.

"The first group who is quiet with their books put away gets two points," I declared. Suddenly those hot, tired, loud bodies began to frantically shove books in their desks. Some hurried their neighbors, others admonished, "Shut up!" to their fellow classmates.

"We're ready!" shouted group two.

"We were ready first!" argued group one.

"Hey, how 'bout us?" hollered group six.

As the teacher and ultimate decision maker, I was left wondering why I now had to be a referee. Why did my simple group-point system, which worked so effectively to get kids in control one minute, become so problematic the next?

"Group one was first," I finally stated. Moans of disapproval greeted my decision.

The Quest for Intrinsic Motivators

Many teachers experience similar frustrations when they teach students who are not intrinsically motivated. Throughout our collective 10 years of teaching, we certainly had our share of disappointments as we explored ways to encourage students to become motivated and take responsibility for their behavior, their work, and their class participation. We talked to peers and mentors; we read professional journals and attended workshops and classes; we trusted our instincts. We tried many different strategies, including techniques drawn from multiple intelligence research (Gardner, 1993), 4Mat (McCarthy, 2000), project-based learning (Chard, 1998), and student-developed rubrics (Lazear, 1998).

Our students' interest and class participation grew with the strategies we tried, but student-led class meetings provided the greatest opportunity to foster empathy and responsibility in our students. With no demand to produce a product, class meetings propelled by student-
generated issues offered practice in really hearing another person's point of view. As a result, students were more sensitive to one another and more willing to deal with and resolve issues—both during regular class time and during class meetings.

By examining our own teaching practices, we developed a list of teacher mind-sets essential for nurturing intrinsic motivation:

- Move away from rewards, threats, and punishments.
- Focus primarily on the students' social and academic growth.
- Emphasize community building.
- Teach explicit cooperative skills.
- Talk less and listen more.
- Value students' ideas, opinions, and abilities.
- Involve students in planning and decision making.

**How Student-Led Meetings Work**

Student-led meetings are common practice for teachers wishing to create an environment of caring and open communication, as we did (Child Development Project, 1996). The meetings give students a safe venue for bringing up concerns, listening to others' points of view, sorting through possible options and outcomes, and deciding what's best for everyone. Even though teachers certainly can and do bring up concerns, students generate most of the discussion items. When students are ready for the responsibility of leading their peers, the group determines who will guide the discussion and helps select the recorder(s) and, sometimes, a timekeeper. Paravision, a group problem-solving process developed by Karen Benson of California State University, Sacramento, outlines the core steps we follow to resolve issues in the meetings (1995):

- The author of the issue shares the idea or concern.
- The class asks clarifying questions.
- Everyone brainstorms possible solutions.
- The author of the issue selects a resolution (not a punishment) that is consistent with the class constitution and that the "offender," if one exists, consents to.

Class structures vary, but some commonalities include having regularly scheduled meeting times one to three times per week; placing desks in a circle; using a log book to record issues and decisions; and following predictable meeting procedures. Those procedures include (1) expressing a personal joy or giving a compliment, (2) revisiting previous issues and seeing how things are going, and (3) sharing new issues and applying problem-solving processes (Nelsen, 1987).

**Preparing for Student-Led Meetings**

Teachers play an important role in preparing students for their leadership roles and their
supportive participation in class meetings. By setting up regular in-class projects and community-building activities in which students work together, get to know one another, and have fun in non-threatening situations (see "Community-Building Activities," p. 66), teachers foster a sense of community and willingness to trust classmates (Child Development Project, 1996, 1997a, 1997b).

During the first month of school, teachers need to model a problem-solving process and teach cooperative skills—taking turns, actively listening, dealing with different points of view, and making compromises (Kagan, 1992). Teachers and students together should establish class-meeting guidelines, such as "No put-downs."

**Sustaining the Effectiveness of Student-Led Meetings**

Real growth requires time. A teacher must be willing to give up the "quick fix" and make a commitment to this long-term process. Learning to listen to someone else's point of view, sorting through possible options and outcomes, and deciding what is best for all concerned through trial and error take time. Solutions often don't work initially; the group must revisit issues; and it's hard to make time for meetings with an already crowded curriculum.

Fortunately, teachers need to model appropriate behavior less and less as the year progresses, but they may have to intervene occasionally to keep the students on track. When they do intervene, teachers should use questions rather than give directives. Not "That doesn't fit with our agreements," but "Is that consistent with our agreements?" or "How would you use the Golden Rule in that case?"

**Intrinsic Motivation Plus Empathy**

Student-led class meetings provide a way to grab students' attention and expand their sense of responsibility. Because students facilitate the meetings and struggle with solving issues important to them, they are more willing to accept the results of their decisions. The process is theirs; they have ownership.

Besides improving students' motivation, reliability, and involvement in class activities, the meetings increased our students' sensitivity, caring, and ability to cooperate with classmates. Student-led meetings became a vehicle for promoting many other positive characteristics as well: self-reliance, critical thinking, problem-solving skills, empathy, and a sense of community. The following excerpt from a February class meeting (five months into the school year) reveals a growing compassion and understanding among class members.

Michael was a victim. He acted it, encouraged it, and bemoaned it. One more time he was going to share in a class meeting how he was "done wrong." But this time I was going to keep quiet and see whether the class could respond in a sensitive way without my interference.

"A sign was stuck to my back during math without my knowing it. Everyone was snickering and teasing me, but I didn't know why," Michael told the class.

Silence.
Then, one by one, students began to speak up. "I saw it there but didn't know how it got there." "I saw it there, but didn't do anything." "I saw it, too."

More silence.

Suzanne's quivering voice broke the stillness. "I did help put it there, Michael . . . and I'm really sorry." Tears collected in her eyes.

"I'm sorry, too," David shared, "cause I was part of it. It was supposed to be funny. It was a joke gone bad."

The class was still, and the students' attention was on themselves. They began remembering something we'd talked about earlier in the year: "Silence is consent."

The students began summarizing their thoughts: "Next time I'm going to say something." "Me, too." "It's like we agreed with the people that did it." "I'll say something next time." "Megan did say something. She's the one who took the note off Michael and told him."

Many times throughout the year, they had listened to one another talk about how teasing and ridicule hurt them. It takes time, but as this meeting demonstrates, empathy can grow. The students resolved not to let that sort of thing happen again—and, for the balance of that year, teasing did stop.

**Grounded in Research**

The work of many researchers explains the success of what we've done. From Dewey's "organic connections" to Bowlby and Ainsworth's "attachment theory," and from Glasser's "choice theory" to Kohn's "rewards are punishments," student-led class meetings validate them all.

Dewey taught that there is an organic connection between experience and education, that the real, lasting learning field is the student's life. When classroom education relates to a child's growth and needs, learning will occur (1938). Likewise, when students' own needs and interests form the agenda of class meetings, they invest themselves, pay attention, and learn.

Bowlby and Ainsworth developed the attachment theory, which says that children who feel a supportive, emotional attachment to an adult are more likely to have positive relations with others, feel secure, and be willing to explore the world around them (Bretherton, 1992). Teachers foster support and understanding in students when they create a classroom environment in which students feel safe enough to risk sharing their points of view. In such classrooms, students are more open, engaged, and fully participatory in their own education.

Glasser's choice theory connects basic needs to human behavior (1969, 1986). Students choose their behaviors in an attempt to meet their needs. Class meetings, particularly those facilitated by students, offer students a time to lead, listen, and be heard. This opportunity contributes to their sense of involvement and belonging—building blocks for compassion, understanding, and empathy.

Kohn's books (1993, 1996a, 1996b) detail many research studies that show how rewarding
students with stickers, candy, and so forth diminishes their desire to do whatever they are being rewarded for. Many teachers tout how quickly a reward of candy will get students to be quiet and work, but they fail to see that, in the long run, these strategies don't build self-reliance and responsibility. Students' own internal and instinctive interest in sociability and learning is satisfied from developing skills, growing in knowledge, and succeeding in personal relationships.

To increase our students' internal motivation, we simply tapped into their interests and goals, which led us to student-directed class meetings. We came to understand that these meetings create a positive classroom culture that encourages students to trust one another and take risks. The meetings open the door for students to become motivated, autonomous learners who are empathetic, cooperative, and responsible for their own growth.

### Community-Building Activities

Use these activities to help students get to know one another and to build cooperation and teamwork.

**Letter to students.** Before school begins, send a letter to your students. Introduce yourself and tell them about their new classroom. Include two surveys, one for the student and one for the parent, covering interests, strengths, and areas of concern. Have them return the surveys at the Before-School Open House.

**Before-School Open House.** Before school starts for the year, schedule one or two days when parents and students can visit their new classroom, have a brief conversation with you, and return the surveys. Use this time to alleviate "pre-school" jitters.

**Getting-to-know-you conferences.** Schedule non-mandatory "getting-to-know-you" conferences with interested parents. Post a sign-up sheet at Back to School Night. This conference is a time for parents to tell you about their child (interests, strengths, areas of concern).

**People collection** (Child Development Project, 1997a). Use the students' surveys to create a People Search. Write at least one question about each student, although some questions may apply to more than one student. Have students try to find many people who fit the examples on the survey. As they find each new person, have that person write his or her first name on the survey. This activity is a great way for everyone to meet and discover common interests.

Sample:

- Find someone who went to Nevada this summer.
- Find someone who loves to play soccer.
- Find someone whose favorite food is pizza.
**Partner interview** (Child Development Project, 1997a). Pair students and give them a set of questions to ask their partner (favorites, interests, and so on). The interviewer can share some answers with a small group or the whole class. Or have students draw mini-posters that reflect their partners' answers. Share the posters with the class.

**Hand-to-hand.** Have five or six students sit in a circle. One by one, students put their hands on the ground. If anyone puts his or her hand down at the same time as anyone else, or if anyone talks, the game must start over. The goal is to have everyone's hands on the ground. This activity builds community spirit and provides good practice for nonverbal communication. Once a small group succeeds, they merge with another group and try again (Yosemite Institute, 1998).

**Pipeline.** This game requires PVC pipe cut into 12- to 15-inch lengths and then halved lengthwise. Everyone must have a pipe piece. The goal is to roll a golf ball through each pipe segment in one continuous motion to a designated finish line. The ball cannot stop! This activity requires students at the front of the line to run and join the line's end so that the ball always has a pipe to travel through until it reaches the end point. If the ball stops, the team must begin again. No running or walking with the ball in the pipe is allowed.

**Puzzle quote.** Create a large puzzle from wood or cardboard for each group of six or eight students. Mark the puzzles with inspirational quotes. Within their small groups, students select a partner. Partner One is blindfolded and is responsible for putting part of the puzzle together. Partner Two is not blindfolded and is responsible for guiding the first partner. Partners cannot talk, but Partner One may use nonverbal communication (tapping a shoulder or a hand). Partners may have a few minutes to strategize before the activity begins. All partners in the same group work together on the same puzzle. Following the activity, discuss the inspirational quote and its significance to the class (Yosemite Institute, 1998).

**References**


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Studies Center.


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