

Lasallian Professional Development

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this issue

21st Century Strategies to help you grasp the idea of SILENCE and how this applies today in your own classes.

The origins of the 12 Virtues...

In 1785, just before the French Revolution, Brother Agathon, who was the fifth Superior General of the De La Salle Brothers, wrote a document called 'The Twelve Virtues of a Good Teacher'. The list of virtues is like sage advice that a teacher might receive from an experienced Year Level Dean or similar.

The 12 Virtues combines two important pieces of work of St. John Baptist De La Salle's. The spiritual vision of his Meditations and the practical pedagogy of his Conduct of Christian Schools.

The 12 Virtues help answer the fundamental question for teachers in Lasallian schools: *"If I am to touch the hearts of my students and teach them in the best possible way, what practices should I follow and what vision should I have for them?"*

Br Agathon reminds the teacher - if you have a problem in your class, look to your own behaviour first.

12 Virtues and 12 months of 2013. Each month, I aim to provide you with useful, modern strategies, that will allow you to bring De La Salle's ideas right into your own classrooms. I kindly acknowledge Br. Jeffery Calligan for his work on this material and real insight. Enjoy learning about silence!

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The 12 Virtues of a Good Teacher - SILENCE

Silence

The classroom atmosphere should normally be harmonious and quiet, leading to more effective teaching. The teacher will not talk too much.

Do you have the SILENCE that Anne shows below?

Silence



Anne sees her life as a teacher as a way of giving herself for others. She has a wide-open heart, giving liberally and inclusively. All feel welcome in her presence. They know they are accepted, feel free to make mistakes and also to become their best selves.

SILENCE

A virtue that leads the teacher to avoid speaking when (s)he should not speak and to speak when (s)he should not be silent.



Strategy 20-5: Silent Response to Errors

Purpose: To avoid responding in unproductive ways to student mistakes.

Description: Noticing an error or problem and leaving until later a consideration of what, if anything, to do about it.

According to Pilon (1996) the best response to a mistake is often no response, other than a mental note to think about the issue later. Consider these examples.

- John is giving a report of his work to the class. Several times he says “ain’t” and “ain’t not.” Often the best response to such errors is to say nothing and to make a mental note that he and perhaps others need more practice saying “isn’t” and “is not.”
- A student turns in a report that confuses *too* with *to*. Should we mark the error? If we do, two consequences are predictable. First, odd as it may seem, the student will continue making the error; that is, correcting such errors often fails to change a student’s behavior. Second, the student will be less willing to write – sometimes less willing to write anything for anybody, even himself. Students rarely enjoy activities that lead to many corrections.

Instead of on-the-spot corrections, we might do nothing other than to remember the error and make a note to create an appropriate mini-lesson on another day for the whole class or for a small group. And at that time, we probably do not want to say, “We need to review *too* and *to*; we have not mastered that yet,” or anything else that may communicate to the students, “You should have already learned this.” Such a message is unnecessary and may foster discouragement. We might instead simply teach the lesson as if it had never been taught before, perhaps as follows:

Here on the board is an example of *too* used correctly in a sentence. And here is an example of *to* used correctly. It is, of course easy to confuse them. I’d like each of you to please write a pair of sentences like these on scrap paper. In one, use *too* correctly. In the other, use *to* correctly.

When the students are finished writing, we might continue like this:

Now please share your sentences with a partner. Check to see that the *to* and the *to* are correctly used in all sentences. If your partner wrote something interesting, you might also enjoy reading it.

In short, it’s often wiser *not* to point out an error in order to get students to learn. Instead, simply teach a lesson about the topic again at another time. As long as the lesson has a quick pace, it will be an easy review for students who already understand, and for those who do not, a chance to learn it in a climate free of criticism or a sense of failure. Alternatively, we might teach the lesson only to the students who need it, allowing the others to work on something else.

Keep in mind the message of one of the *Truth Signs* (Strategy 4-1): “We each learn in our own ways, by our own time clocks.” Students sometimes encounter material they are simply not yet ready to master. We do well to accept such times as a natural part of the learning process and refrain from correcting all student misunderstandings on the spot.

Yet it is not always advisable to keep silent about errors. In solid, accepting relationships, people usually do not mind having someone point out a few of their mistakes. However, when unsure, choose the Silent Response to Errors. It is safer. Be like a physician who chooses the medicine most likely to avoid harmful side effects.

Strategy 33-12: Silent Response to Misbehavior

Purpose: To give students room to solve their own problem and to avoid a hasty, inappropriate response.

Description: Mentally noting misbehavior and leaving until later the consideration of what, if anything, to do about it.

A student fails to bring in the required notebook, chats with a neighbor while we are talking, neglects to do work assigned, or makes a smart-aleck remarks. Sometimes the best response is the Silent Response, a response to oneself that says, "There is a problem here. Let me note it now and see, later, if I want to do something about it and, if so, what." Sometimes such later attention is, in fact, needed. But sometimes it is not. The problem may disappear on its own. That outcome is especially likely if the class climate is lively, kind, and supportive and students have a growing respect for the teacher, who, by responding silently to misbehavior, demonstrates a self-confidence that itself inspires a positive response. In such cases it makes no sense to use our limited energies to respond immediately to every incident, especially when the problem is in no way dangerous and might well solve itself or soon be solved by student-initiated self-responsibility.

Other Reasons to Use a Silent Response

In addition to the possibility that a problem will disappear on its own, why else should we respond only by making a mental note to ourselves. Some reasons to consider:

- The Silent Response models an adult with personal security, someone who is not worried that one incident will destroy the group climate. It can be reassuring and educational for students to witness such a leader.
- The Silent Response communicates a confidence and trust in students. It demonstrates our confidence that they can and will learn to self-manage their behavior, that they do not need to be babied, told what is right and what is wrong at every turn. The Silent Response strengthens the power of positive expectations.
- The Silent Response seems to strengthen our own personal security and sense of community, perhaps partly because as we practice going with the flow, not trying to control every event around us, we learn how to live more peacefully ourselves.
- The Silent Response gives us the space to choose a response that will produce the best long-term effect. It helps us avoid a more impulsive response, one more likely to aggravate our problems. It is the wisdom of counting to 10 before acting.

TEACHER COMMENT

I like the Silent Response to Misbehavior, I use it all the time. If I had to react to each and every little disturbance, both the students and I would go crazy. My first reaction is to ignore a problem. If I reacted every time someone disturbed the class, I bet some students would only mess up more frequently and get pleasure out of that.

– Stuart Rabinowitz, Junior High Teacher

Teacher Comment

Ginger was repeatedly late to my class, but only a few seconds late. Then I sensed Ginger was playing an independence game, that her style was not going along with authority figures. She was bright enough so her lateness was not serious and it was not prompting others to be late, so I decided to ignore the issue and let her live her life in her way. Interestingly, when her lateness stopped bothering me, Ginger stopped being late. Odd, eh?

– Benj Ho, High School Teacher

• An immediate response to a student who has just misbehaved calls attention to the misbehavior. Often it's preferable to call attention to the behavior we *want* in the classroom, to accent the *positive*, rather than add attention to those acts we'd prefer to disappear. This is especially important in terms of our concern for student dignity and growth in self-management. When we call attention to an act of misbehavior by responding to it, a student with questionable self-worth often experiences a further weakening of self-worth, concluding that "I was bad," not "That act was bad."

Further Considerations

- *Demonstrating security, not timidity.* Teachers who respond to misbehavior by only making a mental note, not doing anything overtly, are not timid. They are secure – or at least strong and wise enough to act as if they feel secure until that security does emerge.
- *When silence is inappropriate.* A Silent Response is not appropriate when danger is involved – for example, a book is tossed across the room; a fight breaks out between students; a student waves a knife. Physical danger calls for direct, forceful action.
- *Silence now, action later.* Withholding an immediate overt response does not equal no response at any time. We might note a behavior problem and then, the next day, teach or reteach a lesson to some or all of the class. For example, if we notice too much aimless walking about, we can role-play walking in class with efficient purpose and dignity, without criticizing any students for prior behaviors.
- *Reflection and learning.* In some cases we may conclude that there is nothing we can do to prevent the misbehavior. We thereby accept reality. And we might do well to reflect on what we can learn from it, asking questions, like, *Could that misbehaving student be providing me with an opportunity to learn more about treating people who displease me with dignity? About remaining calm in the midst of chaos? About finding new ways to run my classroom?* Great lessons, after all, often come from experiences initially *judged* unfortunate.
- *Avoiding excessive intervention.* In general, minimal interventions are preferable. It's important to give students enough space to practice and eventually master the art of self-discipline. A Silent Response, indeed, can actually make things a lot easier for us. No action is often the best action.



"It would be of little use for teachers to apply themselves to making the students keep silent if teachers did not do so themselves. Teachers will better teach students this practice by example than by words..."

-Conduct of the Christian Schools