Australian
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Focused classrooms
Managing the classroom to maximise learning

Australian Professional Standards for Teachers | Focus Area 4.2: Manage classroom activities

This guide is one in AERO's *Tried and tested* series on evidence-informed teaching practices that make a difference. Teachers can use these guides to reflect on their classroom practice and inform their planning for future instruction.

For this guide, AERO has synthesised the most rigorous and relevant evidence-based practices from meta-analyses, systematic reviews and literature reviews. AERO has rated these sources of information against its Standards of evidence, focusing on evidence generated in an Australian context where possible.

Focused classrooms maximise students' on-task learning time by minimising disruptive behaviour and disengagement. Research shows that students cannot learn as well in classrooms that lack consistency, have too many potential distractions or do not offer ample opportunities to engage. Teachers can create focused classrooms by implementing clear structures and routines, modelling appropriate behaviours, and actively engaging students in their learning.

Evidence-based practices that create focused classrooms are listed below. Note that some of the examples offered may not apply in all contexts, may be more suitable for primary students than secondary students (and vice versa), and/or may look different in different content areas. Reasonable adjustments must be made where necessary to ensure full access and participation for students with disability.

1. **Establish a system of rules and routines from day one.** Your students should have predictability and structure that provide them with certainty about what is expected.

   - Create rules about student behaviour for learning. These rules should create a safe classroom that supports everyone to learn[1]. They should be made with reference to whole-school policies around behaviour management. Ensure that there is a shared language and shared understanding of the rules. One way to ensure shared understanding could be to develop rules collaboratively with your students.

   - Establish routines or cues for your class. These can be for the beginning and end of lessons (for example, 'do-nows' and lesson reflections), for different types of learning activities (for example, protocols for small group discussions) and/or for transitions (for example, moving quickly from one activity to the next). Routines or cues reduce wasted learning time by creating habits of learning that get students responding quickly to your instructions[2].

   - Pre-plan and rehearse your responses to positive and negative behaviours. Responses should be able to be implemented on the spot and with consistency, to reinforce expectations[3].

2. **Explicitly teach and model appropriate behaviour.** Your students need to know how to perform the roles expected of them.

   - Explicitly teach rules and routines to your students. Rules and routines should be clear and well-defined and can be reinforced through classroom discussion[4].

- Model the behaviours you expect from your students; for example, arrive in class on time, and listen to and speak with all your students in a consistent and calm manner to set expectations about how to interact in the classroom[5].

- Use simple prompts or 'pre-corrections' to remind your students of expected behaviours; for example, Q: "When we get to the library, what are the three things we need to remember to be responsible?"; A: "Walk on the left, be responsible for your books and surroundings, and talk in a quiet voice."[6]

- Manage the behaviour of your students positively and proactively. Provide consistent and clear responses that draw attention to expected behaviours; for example, provide on-the-spot praise or offer positive or corrective verbal feedback tied to specific behaviours[7].

3. **Hold all students to high standards.** Your students should feel valued and supported in their learning and know that they are capable of achieving their learning goals.

- Set ambitious and achievable goals with your students. These should be specific, regularly revisited and revised as your students make progress. Your students should always know where they are at in their learning, and what they need to learn[8].

- Emphasise to all of your students that their learning goals can be realised. Students should know that they have your full support to achieve the learning goals; they just need to work hard and stay focused.

- Give specific feedback that acknowledges student effort. Your students should understand how their effort has contributed to progress towards their learning goals[9].

4. **Actively engage students in their learning.** All your students should be encouraged to actively participate.

- Provide your students with frequent opportunities to engage. Ask questions or give directions that require all students to think about and respond to what is being learned[10].

- Present your students with only one task at a time. Students should not be asked to complete two tasks simultaneously and/or to engage in random, rapid or frequent periods of switching between tasks, as this can interfere with learning depth, retrieval and concentration[11].

- Organise classroom seating to maximise on-task behaviour; for example, when using explicit forms of instruction, consider row or horseshoe seating to encourage a focus on the teacher, and for group-work activities, consider semicircles or clusters of desks to encourage your students to interact[12].

- Arrange your classroom and lessons so that 'objects' consistently appear in the same place; for example, rules are always written on the right-hand side of the board and presentations use the same template for all activities, with title, content and instructions always in the same place[13].

Thie evidence-based practices outlined above are proven to provide the greatest chance of success for addressing learning gaps and disruptions to student learning. These practices will make a difference when implemented in conjunction with: formative assessment (know where your students are), explicit instruction (know how to teach your students) and mastery learning (know how to make sure your students learn).

Your students should always know where they are at in their learning, and what they need to learn.

To provide feedback on this guide or view further information, including full references and additional resources, visit AERO's website.

1   Alter and Haydon, 2017.

2   Simonsen, Fairbanks, Briesch, Myers and Sugai, 2008.

3   Alter and Haydon, 2017.

4   Chaffee, Briesch, Johnson and Volpe, 2017.

5   Alter and Haydon, 2017.

6   Ennis, Royer, Lane and Griffith, 2017.

7   Simonsen, Fairbanks, Briesch, Myers and Sugai, 2008.

8   Rubie-Davies, Weinstein, Huang, Gregory, Cowan and Cowan, 2014.

9   Rubie-Davies, Weinstein, Huang, Gregory, Cowan and Cowan, 2014.

10 Simonsen, Fairbanks, Briesch, Myers and Sugai, 2008.

11 Pashler, 1994.

12 Wannarka and Ruhl, 2008; Pashler, Kang and Ip, 2013.

13 Summerfield and Egner, 2009.