

MY TOP 5: Topics For Discussion At The Start Of The Year

by WILSON McCASKILL

1. CREATING A SAFE COMMUNITY

Think of your classroom as a group of idealistic young people who have voluntarily assembled in the biosphere of your classroom to create a brave new world with you as their leader and guide.

Even if they have done it in other years they will need to start the new year by working on the framework of their new world order. We can look to Bill Rogers of Behaviour Management (Scolastic) fame for direction on the four pillars of that framework:

Rights – Responsibilities – Rules – Routines

Having had past experience can only help as the members of this new world are older with more complex requirements, different needs and changing aspirations.

Enthusiastic collective discussion and debate, to determine the content and form of these four pillars, will lead to a deeper sense of attachment to the classroom community.

Regular classroom meetings will ensure that the inevitable personal and interpersonal issues and grievances of the classroom are given a safe forum. Meetings will also permit evaluation, modification and enhancement of the four pillars.

Determining the “state of the nation” at various times will help students assess how effectively they have been at creating their desired community.

We simply can’t expect young people to become positive contributors to the life and fabric of the larger communities in which they will live as adults, if they haven’t been practicing how to do so as children.

Schools and classrooms play a very important role here and when allowed to be actively involved in creating, sustaining and maintaining their classroom and school community, children will rise to the occasion and do it well.

There will of course, have to be many times when teachers make executive decisions. But that's alright – think of the many occasions that we have adhered to a ruling of government when we have disagreed with it. Why? Hopefully, for the sake of the greater good and not fear of the consequences. Ummm?

These maxims may help:

All maxims taken from the book, *By Wisdom Not By Force* by Wilson McCaskill

1. *Put simply, the safe classroom is one in which no child needs to be defensive.*
2. *Schools are the hubs of communities and can, through educating the children in their care, change and shape communities for the better.*
3. *Encourage children to question everything. The truth is not passed on. It is continuously rediscovered and survives rigorous examination.*
4. *Never say or do things to belong to a group that makes it hard to be alone with yourself.*
5. *Encourage children to come to school to better themselves by being able to work with others. And the more others they can work with the better people they will become.*

2. THE GOLDEN RULE

“TREAT OTHERS AS YOU WOULD LIKE THEM TO TREAT YOU”

This is the big one. The bedrock upon which all else will be built. Even if your students have a good handle on the rule and understand it well it is important to discuss it again.

As they get older the complexities of the rule become more apparent and the difficulty of adhering to it more demanding.

Ask them to share examples of when their personal behaviour either stuck to the rule or broke it. Address online behaviour with reference to the rule.

Make sure you contrast the Golden Rule to what I sometimes call the Broken Rule: “*Treat others as they treat you.*” Encourage students to share stories about when they behaved by the Broken Rule and what prompted that behaviour.

Ongoing, age appropriate discussion about the Golden Rule needs to be maintained. Avoid letting it slip into the background of school and community life.

To enhance and deepen your Golden Rule discussion, add these two sayings to the mix:

1. *We should not expect from others what we would not give ourselves.* – anon
2. *Be the change you want to see in the world.* – Ghandi

They are excellent doorways to understanding the virtues of tolerance, cooperation and compassion.

3. COURAGE AND BRAVERY

“COURAGE IS THE VIRTUE THAT MAKES ALL OTHER VIRTUES POSSIBLE.”

Winston Churchill

It goes without saying that if your school is to be characterised by the virtuous behaviour of its students then they are going to have to know something of what constitutes courage.

Clichéd ideas of what it is will not hold them in good stead and learning to recognise it in the behaviour and decision of others, as well as themselves, deepens their understanding of its necessity and increases their chances of finding courage when it’s needed.

Some maxims that will help:

All maxims taken from the book, *By Wisdom Not By Force* by Wilson McCaskill

1. *When in fear, we run from our problems, they always get bigger. When we courageously turn to face and tackle them they soon shrink to a size that allows us to blow them away.*
2. *Only those who meet fear know what it means to be brave. In the face of fear, we must make the decision that what scares us is less important than the benefits gained from overcoming it.*
3. *Know yourself well. Discover your strengths and weaknesses. Be brave, work on both. Using your strengths will reward you with success and confidence. Working to strengthen your weaknesses will build resilience and perseverance.*
4. *The bully attacks out of fear. The sadness is that they lack the courage to face the fears that are rapidly damaging them.*
5. *We owe it to each other to help each other face our fears.*
6. *Bullying is an act of cruelty. It is a small person who tries to feel bigger at the expense of others.*

4. REASONED AND RESPONSIBLE

***“IF YOU DON’T KNOW WHY YOU’RE DOING SOMETHING
DON’T DO IT BECAUSE IT’S MOST LIKELY WRONG.”***

from the book, *By Wisdom Not By Force* by Wilson McCaskill

The creation of a genuinely safe school environment that supports the learning and development of children can only be achieved if students are reasoned and responsible.

Encourage your students to see school as the hallowed ground of thinking. Let them see and understand that our greatest power is the power to think, to reason.

It's important that they have reasons for the things they say and do. Those reasons may not be ones you agree with, but in having them you have an entry point into discussing the behaviour with the student.

Our desire is to govern by consent and not coercion. This is only possible if our students are reasoned, rational, thinking human beings.

***“IT’S REASON THAT MAKES A CHILD RESPONSIBLE AND RESPONSIBLE
CHILDREN FIND MANY REASONS FOR RIGHT ACTIONS.”***

from the book, *By Wisdom Not By Force* by Wilson McCaskill

5. BEING SENSIBLE

“IT TAKES GREAT STRENGTH TO BE SENSIBLE.”

from the book, *By Wisdom Not By Force* by Wilson McCaskill

Authority dependent children (those who only do the right thing because they fear the consequences if they don't or desire the reward if they do or because some authority figure is present making sure they do) always assume you're trying to control them to make things easier for you.

Unlike independent, self-managing children who do the right thing because it's the best thing to do, authority dependent children are ruled by their emotions, not the least of which is fear – the great motivator behind so much of what we will or won't do.

Explain to children that emotions are very powerful messages from you to you, but they are not always right. Controlling those emotions takes great strength and that strength comes not from muscles but from thinking – from strong thoughts and decisions.

Encouraging children to recognise and share those moments when they are the masters and not victims of their emotions, reveals the frequency and variety of situations that constantly test their strength to be sensible.