

Fourteen Ideas About “Classroom Management”

1. Consider never using the term “classroom management.” It implies that creating a good learning and working environment is a discrete skill, and to us the term equates what educators do with what corporate managers do. Consider thinking in terms of collaborating effectively with students on learning and art-making, or, where necessary, effectively asserting control over a group of students in the interest of organization. That seems both a more accurate and more honest way of talking about this part of teaching.
2. Ninety percent of a good learning and teaching environment has to do with curriculum. If your curriculum is based on engaging study of engaging material, students will be engaged.
 - By “curriculum” we do not mean just a syllabus or lesson plan. While these things are important, they are only a small part of successful curriculum. What we mean is that if you have something real to teach, some clarity about what it is and how to teach it, and some genuine enthusiasm about it, students will almost always respond and engage with the work. If any of these things are lacking, engaging students will inevitably be difficult.
3. You do not need to expect the same norms of behavior as are appropriate in other contexts.
 - You need to establish an environment that serves art-making in your medium with your students. If you are in a classroom it is okay, and in many cases even necessary, to allow students much greater freedom and spontaneity than may be possible during academic classes.
 - One of the most important things we bring to schools and other institutions is a *different environment for art-making and learning*.
 - If it’s okay for adult artists to talk a lot, mess around some of the time, and even create some controlled chaos in their workspaces, then it must be okay for young artists to do so as well.
4. You should be extra collaborative with teachers and staff around this question.
 - If you are working in a school or other institution with specified norms and rules of behavior, you *should* seek to modify or suspend them as necessary in order to create a space for art-making. But you also should seek to work as collaboratively as possible with teachers and staff to explain your needs and the needs of the work and determine what may or may not be possible and acceptable in a given situation.
 - If you frame the question as one of creating an art-making space and not one of “superior teaching methods,” you may often find that teachers are not only willing to work with you but even enthusiastic about creating a “de-schooled” space.
 - Confident and capable teachers understand that students are perfectly able to work in different ways in different circumstances. Just because a teacher allows noise, movement and even some chaos during art-making does not mean that he or she has to accept these things at other times. Kids in particular are very aware of the fact rules and norms are contextual. Consider how differently kids behave on a playground—where they often have their own quite elaborate and developed systems of social and physical norms—and in even a loosely run classroom. It

makes sense that a studio, physical or metaphorical, should have its own rules and norms, tailored to the work being done in it.

5. Make your own rules, but make as few as possible.
 - You have to find the rules that fit you, your medium and your students.
 - With teenage or adult students we almost never impose “rules.” We simply explain safety norms and technical practices that relate to properly handling equipment.
 - In many teaching contexts with kids Nick has only one rule: Don’t be a jackass. This is generally understood by kids of all ages to mean “don’t be rude, disrespectful, destructive, obstructive or dangerous.”
 - Sometimes we are more explicit: Either make work or stay out of the way.
 - When there are students who, for whatever reason, find it hard not to obstruct the work of others, we sometimes designate a corner as “the play area.” If you don’t want to work, you can either watch others work or you can go to the “play area” and do whatever you want, as long as it’s not dangerous. You might be surprised at how few kids will take you up on this offer. No one really wants to be seen as trivial and excluded on that basis.
6. Make your rules serve the art-making and the discipline, or be clear that they are about something else.
 - The more distinctly your rules relate to the art-making, and the less they seem like an arbitrary extension of the school’s or institution’s rules, the more they will support your teaching.
 - You should be able to explain your rules. For instance, if you want to forbid kids in a digital studio to have Facebook open while they are working in Photoshop, be clear about why. Maybe it’s because you want them to focus intensely on their images without distraction. Maybe you feel that this is essential. But if it’s really because *you* find it distracting or disrespectful for them to be multitasking, then you should say so. Either rationale is valid, but it’s much easier for any artist to accept rules when he or she is clear about where they are coming from.
7. Don’t drive yourself crazy.
 - It’s your workspace too. It’s okay to have rules and even arbitrary demands to protect your sanity. Just as you relate to students as fellow artists, they should relate to you as an artist also. Sometimes you just have to say, “No freakin’ drums today! I can’t take it!” Usually students get this. But if they don’t, they should.
8. Be flexible.
 - If the rules are there to serve the art-making, then they should be adaptable and flexible as the situation demands. Students get this too—they are used to negotiating all kinds of expectations and contexts, and since teaching artist work is about art-making, not behavioral training, consistency is not the main thing.
9. Involve students.
 - Even very young students are completely capable of highly nuanced and effective self-organization. A few minutes of watching kids on a playground will confirm this: When they want to, kids regularly establish collaborations, enforce expectations and just generally get things done. If kids are involved in something that matters to them—a game, a sport, art-making—they will often take care of the interpersonal details themselves, leaving you free to help them develop their

work as artists. If you don’t get too hung up on behavior, they probably won’t either.

- Sometimes you can usefully co-opt existing social mechanisms in a group of kids. Some kids are good at organizing other kids and are accorded a certain leadership by their peers. There’s nothing wrong with delegating organizational tasks to kids who are good at them, as long as you don’t make too big a deal of it—recognize and use the respect a kid has earned from peers, but don’t exaggerate it. The kid who has a lot of younger siblings may be particularly good at quieting a group down and getting them focused.
- It’s okay to delegate authority for other reasons. Sometimes Nick will ask a class to identify the kid who is compulsively organized and tidy. He’ll ask that kid if he or she wants to be the “studio manager” in charge of making sure everyone keeps the place in good working order. Often this works out well, but only if he is careful to be informal about the whole thing and not get dragged into an exaggerated and overblown assigning of hierarchical posts. The point is for the kids to keep the studio up, not for some kid to have a formal position of authority. If the kid is perceived to be the “studio manager” based on Nick’s arbitrary choice, then he or she is likely to have a hard row to hoe. But if the kid is understood to be the “studio manager” because he or she is good at such things, or just interested in the role, and it’s understood to be a useful and helpful role, then usually things will go well.
- Sometimes you can usefully support leadership and organizational ability in a kid who *is not* viewed as a leader or organizer by his or her peers. Once in his classroom, a seventh grader who was generally perceived as a slightly annoying know-it-all spontaneously brought Nick a beautiful floor plan with which he wanted to completely rearrange their recording studio in the interest of better work flow. The plan was brilliant. Nick told the student he could implement it provided he could get the other kids to help him. It was a struggle, but the student made it happen. He learned some things about persuasion and collaboration, and their studio was the better for it.

10. Avoid appealing to external authority.

- Few things can blow the atmosphere in a student studio more quickly than threatening to send a kid to the principal. Of course, in instances of serious misbehavior or destruction one may have no choice but to default to standard school or institutional procedures and to defer to teachers and administrators. In all but the most serious instances this is probably avoidable. If it is at all possible, you want to maintain a “de-schooled” space for art-making, not because school is inherently bad but because real artistic invention and exploration require that students and teaching artists work in an environment that is free from the normal expectations and limitations of many of the institutions in which we work. Perhaps we need to put aside the fact that we are in school, or prison, or a hospital, and feel that we are in a studio or other place where art-making is the whole point. We have to maintain a good working environment on the premise that we are all there to make art, and we should remove any obstacles to fun and unfettered art-making. When the work itself is at the center, it is remarkable how

thoughtful and collaborative groups of kids can be, even kids who are considered "rowdy" or defiant in other situations.

11. Don't escalate conflicts unnecessarily.

- Of course, one has to put the safety of students above everything else at all times. And when collaborating with a teacher one should defer to the teacher's greater familiarity with her or his students in situations where students come into conflict. Some conflicts between students are very serious, longstanding and potentially dangerous.
- We should also remember that kids are often self-regulating in minor conflicts. Conflicts frequently come about for trivial reasons—a kid is having a bad day, a kid was gratuitously mean. For good art-making to happen, we have to promote an atmosphere in which criticism and even negative opinions can be openly expressed, but also kept in perspective—as opinions. Of course, when the expression of opinions becomes hurtful and destructive to students, it becomes an obstacle to art-making and learning. But small conflicts between students are often momentary and can be escalated by excessive or premature adult intervention.
- We do not have to maintain perfect peace in a kid studio any more than we do in an adult studio or workplace. Students do not have to like each other all the time, or ever, for good art-making and even close collaboration to take place. If students are to feel that the work they are doing is genuinely their own and if they are to develop their own artistic vision, they need to have a sense that they are not being constantly controlled. Just as many important and complementary types of learning and experience happen in unsupervised play on a playground, the particular learning that takes place when we make art that is our own can take place only when we feel a certain freedom of expression in the moment. If the emphasis stays on the work, not on the students' behavior, more often than not conflicts will quickly recede. If you must intervene, do so with an eye toward getting kids past conflicts quickly and back to working alongside one another as artists. Shake hands and move on.

12. Do not allow yourself or others to use art-making as a reward or to deny it as a punishment.

- Because students often look forward to working with teaching artists and making their art, teachers, administrators and even teaching artists can be tempted to use art-making as a reward, or the denial of the opportunity to make art as a punishment. This can take the form of allowing or denying participation in art-making based on a student's behavior in other contexts. Student behavior, performance or achievement can be used as a criterion for selection for arts programming.
- While this impulse is understandable, especially in classrooms and institutions where it is very difficult to establish a positive environment for learning and art-making, we believe that to use art-making as a behavior management tool is alienating to all involved, counterproductive educationally, and ultimately incompatible with creating a context for free art-making.
- Selecting only "well behaved" or "high achieving" students for arts programming inevitably interferes with students' sense of themselves as artists and encourages

them to produce work that will maintain or enhance their favored status. This is not to suggest that one can't have application or selection criteria to determine which students might benefit most from, or are most committed to, a given art class, project or program. But these criteria should be about art-making, and the specific project or class, not about a student's performance or behavior in other contexts.

- As teaching artists we often experience the ways in which art-making can be especially liberating, exciting and fulfilling for students who struggle in academic and social contexts. It frequently turns out that such students have some of the most interesting artistic ideas, and sometimes are particularly inventive and powerful artists, perhaps for some of the same reasons that they have difficulty in other areas. To link such students' participation in arts activities to performance or behavior in other contexts can be particularly destructive and interfere with what is most beneficial about art-making for these students. It can also deprive the group as a whole of the contributions of such students, and ultimately deprive all of us of some very good and important art.
- In order to teach art we need to approach all our students on their own terms and as fellow artists. We cannot and should not judge them by external criteria, by who they may be in another context, or by what a teacher or administrator has told us about them.

13. You are a role model. You are not a role model.

- You do play a big role in setting the tone in the room. That's just something that happens when you are in a teaching capacity, even if you are pretty low-key about your role.
- If you approach students as artists, they will probably approach each other as artists.
- If you are concerned yourself with the work and not with ego or interpersonal stuff, it is likely that your students will do the same.
- The only role you should model is you. You are not obligated to model some abstract standard of behavior or set of values different from the one that you live spontaneously. If you try, it is unlikely anyone will be positively influenced. If you are not spontaneous and not yourself, it will be hard for anyone to engage with you in an interesting and artful way. No one likes a phony, no matter how well intentioned the dissembling.
- Who you are and how you work can in itself be a powerful and liberating influence for students. That influence can take many forms: It can develop because in some sense students see themselves in you, or because they see you as very different but can connect with you through art-making.

14. Be yourself.

- Whether you are projecting a teacher's authority (as teaching artists sometimes must) or are simply relating to students as fellow artists, as long as you are yourself students will engage with you. They might not agree with you, and they might sometimes drive you crazy, but you will have a relationship with them, and interesting art and other things will undoubtedly come of it.
- If you find yourself trying to project a persona that does not feel comfortable to you, or trying to get students to behave in ways that do not make sense to you—

ways that you yourself would never want to be asked to behave—there will always be a disconnect that will get in the way of the work.

- If you make assumptions and generalizations about students based on cultural, generational or other stereotypes, this will inevitably interfere with your ability to engage them as artists. Even if you are making such assumptions based on good intentions (a desire to be relevant to your students or to seem more familiar to them), students—or anyone—will pick up on the fact that you are responding to them based not on who they *are*, but on who you may think they are. This will be no fun for you or them and will interfere with real art-making. Better to acknowledge that you may not know much about your students' interests and lives (you can find out from them!) than to make what may be incorrect assumptions.
- This work is as much about your own artistic development and fulfillment as that of your students. Your students need to be able to be themselves in order to make their own work and enjoy it. The same goes for you.