

Increasing Students' Opportunities to Respond: A Strategy for Supporting Engagement

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Abstract

This article offers a rationale for using a low-intensity support, increasing opportunities to respond, to promote students' academic engagement and decrease disruptive behaviors. A step-by-step guide to implementing this strategy in the classroom setting is presented.

Keywords

low-intensity supports, opportunities to respond, academic engagement, behavior challenges, inclusive strategies

Managing student behavior is a prerequisite to effective teaching; a well-managed classroom creates an environment that facilitates learning (Emmer & Sabornie, 2015). However, it is no small task to orchestrate such an environment. Directing the activities of many children or adolescents in the relatively small space of a classroom presents several challenges, especially when one or more of the students displays behavior problems. Traditionally, behavior management in schools has relied on reactive policies instead of employing a proactive and comprehensive approach to teach and support students in developing prosocial behavior, but as more schools use multitiered models (Lewis, Mitchell, Trussell, & Newcomer, 2015), they are rethinking outmoded discipline policies. Rather than relying on reactive approaches that simply lay out rules and consequences, and then hope for the best, which leaves both students and teachers at a disadvantage; more sophisticated conceptualizations of how to create safe, positive, and productive learning environments are being realized. These models employ a host of strategies including (a) the use of schoolwide plans for teaching and reinforcing expectations, (b) implementation of social skills and antibullying curricula, (c) team-driven data-informed decision-making practices, (d) introduction of positive behavior support techniques, (e) exploration of new practices such as restorative justice (Teasley, 2014), and (f) the provision of intensive levels of support for students with the most persistent

or demanding needs (Lane & Menzies, 2015; Sugai & Simonsen, 2015).

Managing behavior is complicated because the context is crucial in shaping how students behave (Jackson, 1990; Nieto & Bode, 2011). Consideration of the climate and events in the wider school environment and classroom is as important as understanding the behavior of individual students. When a school community has a plan to thoughtfully address the context of student behavior, the overall effect is more powerful than addressing a student's behavior in isolation. A comprehensive, proactive approach is a significant departure from relying on reactive, and often punitive, responses to misbehavior such as suspension, expulsion, and time-outs. In addition to promoting the effective and sustained teaching of prosocial behavior, a proactive stance offers the opportunity to address troubling issues such as (a) stigmatizing discipline (e.g., teachers' use of sarcasm or humiliating disparagement), (b) public displays of students'

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failures), (c) exclusion from instruction, (d) a lack of engaging curriculum, (e) poorly delivered instruction, or (f) a general climate of intolerance and impatience.

Punitive and/or inconsistent discipline is unproductive because it misses the opportunity to help students understand how to behave in a more socially acceptable manner, thereby improving their chances for success in and outside of school (Lane, Menzies, Ennis, & Oakes, 2015). Evidence suggests that punitive discipline can result in an increase of problem behaviors (Reinke & Herman, 2002), which is associated with a host of negative outcomes. Students whose behavioral difficulties in school are not addressed proactively tend to have lower academic achievement, fewer opportunities to learn (resulting from time-out, suspension, and expulsion), and less satisfying relationships with peers and teachers (Mitchell & Bradshaw, 2013). Postschool outcomes are bleak and include higher incarceration and unemployment rates as well as social and emotional problems such as domestic violence, depression, and substance abuse (Kauffman & Landrum, 2012). Teaching and supporting good behavior is as critical as attention to academic success. Some might say more so because without the requisite prosocial behaviors, students are unlikely to experience much success either in school or later in life.

Instructional Techniques to Support Engaged Behavior

This article examines an instructional aspect of the classroom context to promote student engagement rather than focusing on classroom management per se. When instruction is sufficiently engaging and students are appropriately challenged by the work (i.e., in their zone of proximal development), they are less likely to use disruptive or off-task behavior as a technique for escaping academic tasks (Alberto & Troutman, 2013). Of course a teacher must first have basic classroom management procedures and routines in place, establish rapport with his or her students, and minimize the physical limitations of the classroom (e.g., adequate space to line up or get materials). In addition, establishing clear expectations, teaching those expectations explicitly, and reinforcing the desired behaviors are building blocks for positive classroom management that set the stage for instructional activities (Sugai & Simonsen, 2015). However, a sometimes overlooked but essential part of managing student behavior is careful attention to instructional practices.

One of the most powerful ways to minimize behavior challenges is to ensure students participate in the task at hand. Some types of instructional practices engage only a few children at a time, leaving others to disrupt the class or be off task. Using techniques that demand students' active attention makes off-task behavior less likely. Instructional practices such as well-structured peer collaboration,

project-based learning, and activities that require active involvement all promote maximum engagement (Emmer & Gerwels, 2002; Wurdinger, Haar, Hugg, & Bezon, 2007). However, a considerable amount of students' time is spent in whole-group activities that may not have a high degree of participation built into them. One frequently used whole-group technique is *checking for understanding*, but it is often conducted in a way that reduces students' ability to participate. Typically, a teacher poses a question, a student responds, and then the teacher evaluates the answer (Cazden, 2001). The hope is that all students are listening to the response and are learning from it, but finding a way to let all students *actively* participate can reduce the off-task behavior of those least likely to pay attention.

Opportunities to respond (OTR) is a strategy that can make whole-group instruction more effective because it allows all children to participate in the lesson at the same time (MacSuga-Gage & Simonsen, 2015). The OTR strategy also relies on optimal pacing to sustain students' attention. Kounin (1977) examined the role of pacing in maintaining students' interest in a lesson and how it affected on-task and off-task behavior. He documented the many ways teachers ignore the importance of pacing without even realizing it (Kounin, 1977). The OTR strategy is a structured approach to using an appropriate instructional pace to maximize engagement.

The OTR strategy is also designed to increase a student's chance of answering correctly and to reduce the anxiety some students may feel about participating in class (Messenger et al., 2015). Often, students with behavioral challenges do not participate meaningfully in academic activities. In some instances students avoid participating by being disruptive (e.g., out of seat, disturbing other students, and being noncompliant), whereas other students avoid participation in a more passive manner (e.g., not volunteering to participate or simply not responding when called on individually). Either way, these behaviors may lead to a negative interaction cycle in which the teacher solicits student participation but students do not engage and miss important opportunities to participate and build skills as planned. Although not intentional, teacher–student relationships are hampered if the teacher shifts attention to students who are more eager to participate or require less energy to motivate. Because OTR demands the engagement of every student, it is both an efficient and an easy intervention to address challenging behaviors (Simonsen, Fairbanks, Briesch, Myers, & Sugai, 2008).

Several studies have indicated that this relatively easy-to-use strategy supports a range of students in participating in classroom activities and instruction. For example, OTR has been effective with preschoolers (Godfrey, Grisham-Brown, Schuster, & Hemmeter, 2003), elementary-age students (Haydon et al., 2010; Haydon, Mancil, & Van Loan, 2009; Lambert, Cartledge, Heward, & Lo, 2006), and secondary-age

students (Haydon & Hunter, 2011). It has been used successfully in inclusive classrooms (Wood, Mabry, Kretlow, Lo, & Galloway, 2009), in self-contained settings for students with significant behavior challenges (Sutherland, Alder, & Gunter, 2003), as well as with students with moderate to severe disabilities (Berrong, Schuster, Morse, & Collins, 2007; Skibo, Mims, & Spooner, 2011).

There are three formats of OTR: (a) choral (students respond in unison), (b) individual (teacher calls on individual students but still maintains a pace of 3 OTR per minute), and (c) mixed (both unison and individual together). Studies investigating OTR suggest that choral responding may be the most effective (Haydon et al., 2010; Haydon & Hunter, 2011), and that format is detailed here as a strategy for positive behavior support.

For information and resources on how to measure treatment integrity, behavioral and academic outcomes, and social validity of OTR in the classroom setting, see Lane et al. (2015).

Using Opportunities to Respond

Step 1

The first step is to identify the lesson content to be taught and the instructional objective.

The OTR strategy is effective for reviewing previously learned information and practicing skills. For example, naming letters, practicing multiplication, and reviewing elements and characters in a story would all be tasks suited to OTR. Thinking about the content and how students will learn it is one of the most important instructional deliberations a teacher makes. For example, some types of new content might best be taught by using direct instruction. Other content lends itself to a problem-solving or inquiry approach. In addition to the content and students' familiarity with it, the teacher must also reflect on the preferences and skills of the students themselves, the amount of time available to devote to the lesson, and the desired learning outcomes (Lane et al., 2015).

Consider the review of concepts at the end of a unit of study as this is a frequently used activity across grade levels. For example, suppose that fifth grade students have completed a unit in science on states of matter. Some of the learning outcomes would include being able to describe the characteristics of three states of matter, recognizing that different substances have different properties, and learning that varying pressure or temperature changes the behavior of particles. The teacher's aim is to review this content in a 15-minute lesson with the students. Using OTR offers practice with the material, but the activity also serves as formative assessment because it allows the teacher to quickly determine how well students understand the concepts and which students would benefit from additional instruction.

Step 2

Next, you should prepare a list of questions, prompts, or cues related to the content. After deciding on the content, a series of prompts is prepared for the lesson. These might be questions about the topic, problems to solve, or key vocabulary terms to identify. For the science unit, the teacher could prepare two types of prompts. One is a list of 20 vocabulary terms and their definitions and the other is a set of 25 statements about the unit content that can be characterized as either true or false. Key terms could include the following: matter, property, characteristic, substance, solid, liquid, gas, and solubility. True/false items could include statements such as "Matter cannot be changed by chemical reactions (False)" and "Matter is anything that takes up space (True)."

The goal is to have enough prompts to provide a minimum of three OTR per minute (Sutherland & Wehby, 2001), so the number of minutes in the instructional period is multiplied by three to calculate the total number of prompts to be prepared. Of course some prompts may take students longer to respond and others may take less time, so planning will be based on knowledge of the students, the content, and the type of prompts used. Have additional questions ready so more than the minimum of three opportunities to respond per minute can be offered if appropriate.

Step 3

Determining the modality by which the content (prompts or questions) will be delivered comes next. When presenting content in a whole-group format, an important consideration is whether students can easily see and hear the prompts. Some teachers are fortunate to have Smart Boards, high-quality projectors, or Elmo projection machines on which to display their prompts, but low-tech presentations such as writing on the white board are also effective. Pairing auditory and visual displays will make it easier for students to process the prompts (Caudill, 1998). This is especially true if you are presenting more complex information. In the science unit example, the teacher could project the true/false statement on the screen in large print so that students can easily read it. The definitions are delivered in the same way. The teacher could also read the prompt while it is projected to assist students who are slower readers or who have difficulty processing information from the screen.

Step 4

Determining the modality by which students will respond follows. This step is the heart of choral responding OTR as the teacher will maximize whole-group instruction by designing a format that requires all students to participate

in demonstrating their knowledge of the content (Haydon et al., 2010). Students will do this by answering multiple prompts in a short period (i.e., three OTR per minute). The goal is to design response formats that allow all students to respond simultaneously without creating chaos. It is also essential that the teacher be able to quickly view and synthesize the student responses to use the information formatively.

There are many options for deciding how students will respond. It could be as simple as a thumbs up or down or as sophisticated as an electronic clicker and audience response system. Other options are small white boards, iPads, response cards (i.e., lettered A to D to support answering multiple-choice questions; Wood et al., 2009), and even stacking cups or cards of different colors and placing a designated color on top to signal a specific response.

In the science unit example, the teacher provides students with a set of preprinted cards that have the vocabulary terms on them. The teacher then projects a definition on the screen and students are directed to hold up the matching vocabulary term. This way the teacher can quickly scan the room and tell which definitions are still difficult for students. Alternately, the class may be doing well overall, but the teacher can note whether particular students are struggling with the task. The same format is used for the true/false statements. Students have a card labeled true and a card labeled false. After projecting a true/false statement on the screen, students are asked to indicate if it was a true statement or a false statement by holding up the appropriate card. Just as with the definitions, students performance on this task can be used to decide whether the whole class would benefit from reteaching the concepts or whether individual children need additional small group or one-to-one instruction.

Another important consideration is the accessibility of the system selected for students with disabilities. The response format must not interfere with a student's ability to demonstrate understanding of the content. For example, some students with learning disabilities find it difficult to produce a handwritten response rapidly (Graham & Harris, 2005), so they may do better with preprinted cards or an electronic clicker. Similarly, the teacher may need to limit the number of choices for students with disabilities so they can process all of the options in the allotted time frame.

Equally important as knowing how to respond is knowing *when* to respond. To avoid confusion, teachers using choral responding must signal students to show or voice their answers. Cues can be verbal, gestural, or some combination depending on classroom needs and teacher preference. Examples include raising or lowering one's hand, displaying the word *answer* on the electronic Smart Board, or speaking a cue word.

Step 5

Explaining the format and the rationale for using it is the next step. It is always a good idea for students to understand how a lesson is structured, its purpose, and the teacher's expectations for how to participate (Danielson, 2011). Once students are familiar with the OTR routine, detailed explanations will not be necessary, but the first few times the following elements should be introduced and briefly reviewed before the start of the lesson.

1. Content: in this example, a review of science unit concepts and terminology
2. Task: identify true/false statements and match vocabulary terms to definitions
3. Rationale: to help memorize basic facts and concepts (and to let the teacher know which areas may require additional instruction or attention)
4. Procedure: match cards to the cues projected on the overhead and respond when cued by the teacher
5. Expectations about behavior: remain in seat, do not exceed an appropriate level of noise, and respond using the cards. In schools with schoolwide expectations in place, the expectations for behavior should be consistent with schoolwide procedures. Explain to students that the pace of the lesson is rapid on purpose. Reassure them that the correct answers will be provided after they respond and that the focus is on understanding *why* an answer is correct rather than the fact that they may have answered a prompt incorrectly.

If this procedure is completely new to students, teachers may also want to consider modeling the process with a few sample questions by going through the process at a slower pace. For example, the science lesson could begin with giving the class a few practice cards about people at their school. The teacher would project "definitions" of various people in the school that everyone knows (e.g., helps you in the office, is the principal) and have students select and hold up the names of those individuals. By practicing with questions that are fun and easily answered, students can focus on learning the process without the stress of simultaneously processing the content.

Step 6

Subsequently you will conduct the lesson with a minimum of three opportunities to respond per minute using choral responding. The power of OTR is in pacing that creates momentum and keeps students engaged in the task, but is not so fast that they become frustrated or cannot participate meaningfully (Sutherland et al., 2003). The research on OTR recommends three OTRs per minute once the session

begins. The teacher presents the item and students respond as directed (e.g., response cards, clickers, white boards). However, the teacher also indicates the correct response and quickly corrects inaccurate ones, all within the 3 minutes as a minimum criterion. In addition, paying attention to how well students understand the material and the particular items they are struggling with will provide important information for subsequent instruction. If students have difficulty participating, either the content or the presentation and/or response format needs to be revisited. The OTR strategy may not be appropriate for complex content, and some presentation and response modes may be too cumbersome. However, students will need a few sessions with OTR to become familiar with the strategy, so do not abandon it prematurely.

For the science review, the teacher will introduce the lesson by telling the students they would be practicing the vocabulary and basic facts from the unit they were studying. After giving directions for how to respond, the teacher begins the lesson by passing out the first set of cards, the vocabulary terms. The teacher models how she will project the prompt on the screen and how students will choose from their cards to show their answers. She also reminds students about expected behavior such as remaining in their seats and to keep the noise level low. The teacher then begins the lesson and makes sure to offer three prompts/cues per minute until she is done reviewing the material.

Step 7

Responding to student answers with evaluative and encouraging feedback comes next. During the lesson, the teacher notes the correct answer once students respond. For example, after projecting the definition for the vocabulary term “matter,” the teacher scans the room to look at student responses, and then says, “Any substance which has mass and occupies space is matter. Take a look at your card to see if that is the card you are holding.” She also displays the term on the screen alongside the definition.

While feedback must be accurate and let students know if their response is correct or incorrect, providing supportive and instructive feedback is essential (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Students are more likely to engage when getting the wrong answer is a low-stakes proposition. Establishing an environment where what counts most is participating and doing your best will help students feel comfortable even when they get the wrong answer. This, in turn, increases participation.

Step 8

Last, students are offered an opportunity to give feedback on the strategy. Student feedback is an important element in effective instruction (Chan, Konrad, Gonzalez, Peters, &

Ressa, 2014). Understanding what students think about particular activities and techniques can help a teacher refine them. Creating a one- or two-item survey with items such as “The activity helped me learn” or “I enjoyed the activity” that students can rate on a Likert-type scale offers information on what all students think. This provides more comprehensive feedback than calling on only a few students to voice their opinions. It may also provide insight to those students who have a more difficult time academically or behaviorally and help with tailoring instruction for their particular needs.

Conclusion

Choral responding OTR is an effective strategy when using whole-group instruction to practice fluency, review learned material, and memorize basic facts and information that allow students to move to more complex learning. It offers maximum student participation, making it less likely students will be off task and more likely they will be engaged in learning. This, in turn, can lead to fewer behavioral issues in a classroom. When addressing behavioral challenges, adjusting the context (e.g., instruction) can sometimes be as powerful as are interventions for individual students, with the added benefit of addressing the whole class. Although all behaviors won’t be amenable to contextual changes, it is an important starting place.

As schools and districts move to multitiered models of support for behavior and academics, identifying and consistently using high-engagement strategies will become common. This is especially true for strategies that support inclusive learning environments and are equally effective with all students, including those who require extra support to achieve school success.

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