Critical Analysis of the article: “Dogs as Role Models”

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The article “Dogs as Role Models: A lesson in classroom management” written by Richard Curwin on August 17th, 2012, is a research where the author exposes an experience that he had many years ago with his dog and how he could associate this event with the classroom management and the behavior of his students.

20 years ago, Richard had a death experience in his life that made him to suffer panic attacks, that is why he started a therapy accompanied with a dog called “Otis”. Otis traveled with Richard in all of his trips but some day he had to leave the dog in a trainer’s house while he was working, something that was hard for Richard because he was used to travel with the pet and Otis was unhappy to be in that strange place. In that moment he discovered a curious fact that called his attention; he could notice how the dogs were following a particular dog with a “special charisma”, that is why Richard identified a leader in the group of dogs; this dog was the first that eats or goes into the doors and the others go after him and recognize his power and leadership.

Due to this event, Richard started taking notes about this behavior and he immediately related this kind of particular features with the behavior of his students in the classroom. He began analyzing the behavior of his students and then he compared this behavior with the behavior of the dogs; he eventually found a lot of similarities that made him to think about how to take advantage of it and create strategies that could change and improve the usual classroom management that most of the teachers used to apply. For many years Richard had worried and asked himself about how to control a class when all the students misbehave, talk and disrupt and he finally had considered a possibility to delete this kind of events
that interfere with the normal advance of a lesson and affect the development of the class.

Putting all this finds together, Richard started applying a method into the classroom that was called: “leader of the pack” and he proposed three steps to do it; these steps were the following ones:

First, the teacher has to identify the leader. Richard observed the behavior of the students when one of his students was absent and then he realized if the rest of the students changed their normal way to behave during the class. So, he could identify the power of the person who was absent and the control that he demands on the others.

After identifying the leader, the second step is to call this student and make him aware of the power he or she has on the other students and give to this person a kind of authority helping the teacher with the control of the class and the development of the activities.

And finally, the leader during the class is going to take the control of most of the activities, he is going to keep calmed the students who misbehave or disrupt during the lessons and he is going to be in charge of different responsibilities assuming the role of leader given by the teacher.

I think this article is definitely very interesting because I realize that many small things that we are used to observe and we don’t even appreciate in our daily life are hugely connected with most of the experiences that we are exposed and we need to face every day in our classroom as a second language teachers.
This previous research made me feel in contradiction with myself; I mean, there are issues that I cannot refuse because they are logically facts that are part of our reality like the fact that in every single group we find people that assumes more power than the others and in education I completely agree with the idea that into the classroom we as teachers need to create an environment of “trust” in our students in order to have a successful learning process and positive environment as we see in the article when the teacher promotes leadership. To give the opportunity to students to get involved in a wide way in the development of the lesson is essential to form and environment of initiative, responsibility, participation, willingness and creativity; according to the benefits of giving trust to the learners, Elias, M (2011) said: “When teachers trust their students, the results are astonishing: Positive Behaviors: Students are more willing to follow classroom norms and work cooperatively with peers. Engagement & Risk: Learners are more likely to engage with the curriculum and ask questions Academics”. Others like Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, & Hoy (2001), affirms that Academic performance improves and Ennis & McCauley (2002) said that when there is trust in a classroom, the test scores.

Nevertheless, I disagree in many aspects found in this article because they go against of my feelings and principles. My philosophy of teaching is based mostly in being person before of being a professional I prefer working not only with my head but working with my heart; I mean, I consider we need to be aware that we are working with people that feel and have emotional structures that in some way interfere in their learning process. I consider not comparing the students with dogs; as I said before we can have similarities with the behavior of these animals, actually I love dogs and maybe the author did not want to have a second intention in making this comparison but I think we as an educators we need to be thinker
and complete in our job and to know that the most important aspect that we need to consider in our teaching is the “equality” in our classroom. For me, equality is essential; it is not suitable to make preferences with ones and others even if I see strengths or weakness in some students I think of all them have to assume the same role. This is why I disagree in the idea to highlight leaders all the time because it can cause bad reactions with the rest of the students; about the equal treatment of the students, Farley, A (2013) said: “Teachers should accommodate students’ diverse learning and personal needs but also be mindful not to accord these students special preference and privilege, if they truly want to create a classroom based upon equality”. And Alber, R (2012) said: “Everyone has the same rules. Exceptions may be made for unusual circumstances, but positive social interaction is pretty much the same for everyone”. For these reasons and more, the equal interaction of my students is a positive aspect that I always like to rescue.

The other point presented in the article that I completely disagree is the idea to leave most of the responsibility to particular students, what I want to say is even though I hugely support the opportunity to get my students involved in my classes and the importance of trust and leadership and the help that some students can represent, I do not agree with the fact to forget my role as a model of the students, as a authority and the biggest leader in the classroom; Lea, K (2013) about this position argue: “Again, modeling means that the teacher does most of the work the first time, and then gradually the students do most of the work”. So, What I perceive in the article is not the most suitable way to conduct a class; we as teachers have the control of the class, we can recognize the abilities of some students and the usefulness of their participation and support for the others but we cannot forget who we are; Hester, T (2013) said: “Identify Yourself: Tell your students about who you are and why you’re there. A classroom where each student deeply trusts the teacher has the potential to be a great environment for
learning. To build that trust, tell your students who you are and why you chose to be a teacher. Tell them about your background, what you did when you were their age, and why you want to be their teacher. The more your students know about you and your intentions, the more they’ll trust you to lead them”.

To conclude this critical document and after criticize positive but in my personal opinion mostly negative the article “dogs as role models”, it is important to find other strategies different to the previous ones to control a class and promote a better classroom management methods; I think we should look for other resources that we have in our capabilities. That is why, what I would do instead of creating inequality in my students and losing my role as a teacher, I would make my expectations clear from the beginning of my course, to establish ground rules and share them in a positive way with my students; we need to be assertive and explicit at the same time when we want to conduct a group and not to forget who we are, the importance of our management and the role we are playing; we need to be consistent, referring to this point, Dabbs, L (2011) said the following: “Be Consistent; This is important once your plan gains traction. State your expectations clearly and often. Students shouldn’t be surprised by them, so you need to be consistent. If you let certain behaviors slide once or twice, then be prepared for an encore”. 
References:


One of the questions I am most frequently asked is, "What do I do when several students act out at the same time?" Without resorting to S.W.A.T. gear, there are at least two methods that work almost all of the time. I learned them in a very unusual way.

About 20 years ago, I suffered a horrific event that resulted in a near-death experience. I acquired a trained therapy dog to help me deal with the panic attacks that followed. I took Otis everywhere with me -- 49 states (Hawaii was too complicated) and two countries. Some readers might remember meeting Otis during a training session.

After I stopped taking Otis with me, I'd bring him to his trainer's house when I traveled, a place where several other dogs stayed. Otis was so unhappy when I left that I snuck around to the back window to see how long it took him to adjust. (I did the same when I dropped my children off at day care, as I'm sure many of you have done.) After watching the interaction between the dogs, I was so fascinated that I started taking notes.

I'm not an expert on dog behavior, and I don't claim to be, but I began noticing certain patterns, specifically related to leadership. After a while it was obvious who the dog leader was. That dog ate first, went through the door first and had an effect
on all the other dogs. Size, breed or toughness didn't seem to be factors in the
dogs choosing the leader. It seemed as if some – the "alpha" dogs -- had a special
"charisma" that the other dogs recognized.

Leader of the Pack

Soon I began to look at classrooms to see if students interacted the same as dogs
in choosing and following a leader. While I have no scientific evidence and no
formal research to back me up, I believe that there is a great similarity between
dogs and students in this regard. After many years of working with teachers, I
believe that the strategy I call "leader of the pack" works in most cases of multiple
disruptions.

This strategy seems simple to explain in three steps, but in practice, it's much more
complicated.

Step 1) Find the Classroom Leader

The first question relates to who the leaders are and how many there are. Just like
dogs, student leaders aren't always the biggest, loudest or most visible. Oftentimes
the most obvious source of trouble is not the real leader but rather someone who is
egged on by someone else. In the classes I have observed, I've seen up to two
leaders who sometimes vie for control. I've never seen three or more, because
there is simply no room for more than two.
To find out who the real leaders are, compare the behavior and attitudes of the class once a suspected leader is absent. If the behavior changes, for better or (more typically) worse, that student is a leader. If the class behavior stays the same, then that student does not have a strong influence on the others. You don’t need to wait for a random absenteeism. With an administrator’s help, set up a situation to remove the students for at least a half hour, preferably even longer. Make it a positive removal, definitely not a punishment.

Step 2) Stop the Leader and the Others Will Follow

Once you discover who the real leader is, ask that student to help you keep the class under control. Say something like, “Juan, you are so respected in this class and other students trust you. I want them to learn. Can you help keep things cool in here?” If they are young enough, you can offer them deputy sheriff status. But never offer that to a high school student who will only think you’re crazy! If the leader refuses, accept his or her decision gracefully, but then position yourself right next to the student and continue teaching the lesson. Your proximity will control the student and thus, most of the class.

When there are multiple disruptions, do not try to deal with the class as a whole. Most of the time, this only makes things worse, because you become the common enemy of the group. Deal with students one at a time, even if there is chaos around you. Start with the most influential students and work down. In most instances you will soon regain control.

Step 3) Create New Leaders
This strategy is a variation of the previous two. Divide the class into groups. Change the group membership each week. Chose a group leader, picking the natural leaders at first then giving all students a turn over time. The leader’s responsibility is to help you keep his or her members quiet when necessary and in control if things get out of hand. When you set this strategy up, be sure to explain clearly and completely how the process will work to your class.

When necessary, tell the leaders to quiet their group or to stop disrupting. This way, you are not dealing with a whole class, but maybe five or six leaders, depending on class size.

These strategies will not always work, but they are effective most of the time. They give you an intermediate step before calling in the S.W.A.T. team.

DR. RICHARD CURWIN'S BLOG