



Module Twenty-Four: Class Meetings

This article describes the process of conducting class meetings with students in a school, however, there is great applicability for office meetings held with employees, and even family meetings as well.

Self-Introduction

But before I get into the material regarding class meetings, I wanted to talk about a teacher's initial introduction to their class. In **The Quality School Teacher**, Dr. Glasser suggests teachers carefully craft their answers to the following questions and then introduce themselves to their class by sharing their responses. The questions are:

- Who am I?
- What do I stand for?
- What will I do for you?
- What I won't do for you?
- What I will ask of you?
- What I won't ask of you?

Taking the time to answer these questions will help clarify your own thinking. It will become a work in progress. Make sure when you share an answer with your class that you are telling them who you actually are and not the description of the best self you hope to become. Because when you share these answers, it is as if you are making a covenant with your class. If you can't live up to the standards you proclaim, you will lose credibility. If there is something you are working on and want to share with the class, that's fine, just give them permission to call you on things when you mess up. That's human. However, if you say will never criticize them, and you criticize someone, no one will be able to trust you. If you **say** you are going to it, then definitely **be** about it.

What is a Class Meeting?

A class meeting is a time when students and their teacher discuss certain topics. They generally sit in a circle so there are no places with higher value than others and so everyone can see each other. No one can effectively hide. The understanding is that what each person has to say has merit. One person speaks and everyone listens until time for the next person to speak. The

expectation is that everyone will contribute but there are allowances when a student could "pass" as long as he or she does so infrequently.

The purposes of class meetings are to increase students' positive involvement with school, the teacher and each other; solve class problems; learn to think; build confidence, specifically in verbal ability; and bring relevance and usefulness to classroom instruction.

When to Have Class Meetings

Class meetings should be held regularly and not simply be used for addressing problems, although problem solution is a valid use of class meeting time.

In a classroom, there are basically three types of class meetings. There is the social-problem-solving meeting, concerned with addressing some social behavior in school or the breaking of some classroom rule. There is the open-ended meeting, which is concerned with useful learning and the open discussion of a stimulating, useful and provocative subject. Finally, there is the education-diagnostic meeting, which is concerned with how well the students understand the concepts of a particular part of the curriculum.

Teachers need to be somewhat directive in the first meeting and thereafter as needed. Rules need to be established prior to the first class meeting or can even become the subject of discussion for the first class meeting. These rules need to be maintained throughout or discussed as a class if a need arises to change or alter the rules. During class meetings, teachers must be warm and enthusiastic, keeping blame, punishment and criticism out of class meeting time.

Class meetings should be conducted regularly, perhaps three times a week. The length of these discussions should be appropriate for the age of the students--roughly their age multiplied by two is acceptable. No one should be allowed to criticize or put down another student.

Types of Class Meetings

Open-ended meetings should be used most often, even in environments where problems and behavior issues are the rule rather than the exception. Any intellectually important topic, both related and unrelated to school, could be fair game for discussion. Students are asked to discuss any thought-provoking question. This question should have relevance in their lives and could be related to the curriculum.

Educational-diagnostic meetings are always related to the curriculum the class is studying. This type of class meeting can be used by the teacher to assess whether or not the teaching strategies being used are effective. Teachers can ask the students questions to determine how much they know about an area already covered in class. This should never be used to evaluate individual students but only as a way to determine what the students collectively do and do not know. It is not a competition.

Educational-diagnostic meetings can be used prior to a unit of study to determine what the students already know; after a unit of study to determine what was learned and ideas for

application; to examine the students' perceptions about learning specific information and its usefulness; or to evaluate specific learning or communication skills, possibly vocabulary increase.

Since teachers can have a vested interest in wanting their students to have mastered material the teacher has taught, it might be useful to switch classrooms with another teacher to conduct education-diagnostic meetings to prevent any teacher bias.

During social-problem-solving meetings, students are included in the problem-solving process. The teacher or a student would identify an issue that needs to be discussed and resolved and the students are a major part of brainstorming and contributing to find the solution with the teacher acting as the facilitator and leader. In this way, everyone in the class takes responsibility for problem resolution, while at the same time students are learning valuable life problem-solving skills.

All problems pertaining to the class as a whole or to any individual student in the classroom are appropriate for discussion. A student can bring up a problem or the discussion can be initiated by the teacher.

Dr. William Glasser says, "The discussion itself should always be directed toward solving the problem; the solution should never include punishment or fault finding." The teacher conducts the meetings in a nonjudgmental fashion. He or she may reflect what has been said by the group but should avoid giving his or her own opinion. Students are, however, allowed and even encouraged to express their opinions. It is helpful for other students to hear how they are perceived by their peers."

In order for each student to feel important and heard it will be helpful to have a "talking stick" or some other object available. In this way, whoever has the floor to speak will also hold the talking stick. No one else is permitted to speak, except to ask clarifying questions, until the person with the stick is satisfied that he or she has been heard by the others. Then the stick is passed to the next person with something to say.

Classroom Management

A great use of a classroom meeting is to work together with your students to create classroom expectations that literally everyone can agree to. Creating a classroom where everyone can be successful involves helping students get their needs met but also ensuring that you, the teacher, are able to meet your needs as well.

I start off the discussion about class expectations by saying there are really three things that are important to me. I'd like to talk about those and then get feedback from the class on what they think about my three things and whether or not they'd like to add anything to the list.

The first item is safety. I will say, "It is of the utmost importance to me that everyone in my class, on my watch, is safe. Is there anyone in here who doesn't want to be safe in this class?" There isn't a student alive who won't agree that they do, in fact, want to be safe. There may be

some students who will say they don't care about it but upon further examination, it's obvious they do. They are simply attempting to be resistant. A few questions, without judgment, will bring that in the open. Things like, "So it's OK for me to embarrass you in front of class?" or "You wouldn't care if the whole class ganged up on you and hurt you?" They were simply trying to be derogatory and if you question them further without judgment or sarcasm, there is nowhere for them to go.

The next thing I will talk about is respect. I'll ask, "Is there anyone in here who doesn't want to be respected?" Again, everyone will agree to that guideline. But then I'll talk about how respect looks different to different people so I'll structure a class meeting around a discussion of what respect looks like to each person in the room and what do we, as a class, want to agree to in providing respect to everyone in the room.

The last item is learning. I'm a teacher and we are in a school. Learning is a non-negotiable. It's the purpose of why we are together in the first place. But how do you think it would go over if I were to say, "One of the rules of my classroom is that everyone will learn in here"? There will be many students with high freedom and power needs who will say, "Oh yeah. You think you are going to teach me something? Watch this." And they will commit to avoiding learning at all costs.

However, if I were to say something like this, "You know I am a teacher and this is a school. It's my job to teach. It is my sincere hope that you will all learn something based on my efforts. And just as there will be days when I don't feel like teaching, you may have times when you don't feel like learning. I understand that. Because I am getting paid, I have to teach even when I don't particularly want to. But you aren't getting paid, so I can't **force** you to learn. I get that. But out of respect to me and the other students, what I ask of you is during those times when you really don't feel like learning, that you do it in a way that doesn't interrupt other people from learning. Can we agree to that?"

Because I am not trying to force anyone to do anything they don't want to do, I get compliance with that question. That doesn't mean there will never be anyone who challenges or breaks an expectation. It's going to happen. And when it does, you can have an individual conversation with that student or if it has become a pervasive problem throughout the class, then you can make it the topic of a class meeting to discuss with all students.

Benefits of Class Meetings

1. Even though it seems like a huge investment of your time up front, classroom meetings can save you a ton of time on the back end.
2. When there is co-ownership of the expectations, the students will work together to ensure compliance with the guidelines, freeing you up to teach.
3. When you ask students what they want to learn about a particular topic, they will be more engaged in the learning.
4. When you take the time to assess where the class is on a particular topic, you can tailor your teaching to their abilities.

5. When you discuss the relevancy of material to be covered, it increases student investment in the learning.
6. Students are developing a community and responsibility toward each other, thus decreasing discipline problems in the classroom.
7. You are helping students develop two of the most important life skills--speaking and listening.
8. When you talk to students about current events in a class meeting, it will decrease the side bar conversations about outside things of interest.
9. Class meetings are a way of helping students get "talking" out of their system so they can get right down to the learning.
10. Students who create problems in class will get the benefit of hearing how their behavior affects others and will hear how they are perceived by their classmates.
11. When you invite students to be responsible for solutions to problems in the classroom, you are providing them an opportunity to get their power need met which will decrease the likelihood they will need to try to power over you or other students.

Class meetings are a wonderful way to give your students the gifts of confidence and problem-solving skills.

Summary:

This week, I have provided you with a worksheet to schedule class meetings. It will help to plan them out in advance so you are not searching for a topic at the last minute but remember it is important to also be flexible. If something else seems more important than what you have planned, by all means, defer to the more relevant topic.