

Reader Views

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Interview with Mark Kennedy Author of Classroom Management: The Dance of the Dolphin

Mark Kennedy, an educator as well as author and black belt instructor, speaks about balancing the control needed in traditional teaching situations with the freedom necessary for students to do inquiry and group work. Welcome to Reader Views.

Irene: You have written a how-to book for educators and parents titled “Classroom Management: The Dance of the Dolphin.” Please tell your reading audience what this book is really about.

Mark: The book is really about walking—or dancing—the fine line between having control of a class, and being control-*ing*. I think we teachers think, either coming into the profession or being taught early in our training, that we must do the latter. But that really turns out to be counterproductive. Kids are very capable of self-regulating if given the chance and the tools. The book offers my own system—a small (Micro) class government or corporation—as a proven method to give that chance and those tools.

Irene: As an educator yourself, what inspired you to write this book?

Mark: It’s exactly because I’m a practitioner that this book was conceived. As a mentor teacher in the early and mid-1990s, I had one mentee who was obviously a gifted teacher, but who couldn’t get to the rich *content* he’d planned because of the chaotic *context*. That is, his 7th and 8th grade classes were just out of control. For example, I remember observing one group project he was trying to teach, but while he was giving directions, kids were throwing markers at each other across the room, yelling over him, etc. His supervisor, in desperation, looked to me to solve the problem, which I also really wanted to do. In searching for answers, I decided that my relatively new system of sharing ownership of the class with students, which I had begun using a couple of years earlier, might work for him too. In his case, it was too little too late, however, and he ended up leaving in mid year, only to be replaced, I’m sure, by someone who was more in control, maybe even controlling—whether or not gifted in the art of teaching. I promised myself I’d never get into a situation again where I didn’t have an answer about classroom management for a teacher in need or in training; a complete, detailed how-to for maintaining control while fostering growth in an active, differentiated-learning classroom.

Irene: You mentioned that “Kids are very capable of self-regulating if given the chance and the tools.” That’s a pretty broad statement to make in a society that doesn’t believe kids actually can self-regulate. How do you convince teachers and parents to take the risk and give kids a chance to prove they can be responsible?

Mark: We begin small. Even then, once we see how the first small introduction of co-ownership goes, we adjust what’s not working or pull back from it a bit, keep what is working, rename/redefine our working labels as needed. Then we let that simmer for a while—too many changes too quickly will backfire (please forgive the mixed metaphor). Once the first small step is well grounded, then we can take another, repeating the adjustment process. For example, I might begin to introduce Micro into a new environment—in fact, did just that last fall when I transferred to a different site—with just the Micro money. Up front, I make a stash of cash, enough for keeping it in circulation for how ever many kids there are. Then, I pay the kids regularly for whatever aspect I wish to reward/change/focus on (e.g., by grade for the week or unit, by attendance, for participation, etc.). This is very behaviorist in approach, and the more progressive people reading this may not like it. But it works, and the end result will please the most progressive educator, because external motivation will begin to be overcome by internal motivation as (most) kids learn/wish to regulate their own behavior. Does it work with every kid, all the time? Of course not. But the risk is worth it, and if we don’t get too idealistic in our expectations, by expecting everyone to change overnight or to stop being kids and be adults or to never revert to unacceptable behavior, then all will be well.

By the way, the second step for me, which I only took with this new group after several months, was to appoint class wide leaders—CEO’s of the class as a Micro Corporation. The attitudes and attributes which I personally need to foster and to look for in kids to become leaders are the subjects of Chapters 2 and 3 in the book.

Irene: You use a dolphin as a metaphor. Why a dolphin and not a bear?

Mark: The dolphin metaphor was sparked by a short documentary film my wife and I saw over a winter school break. Our date was just a few days after a potentially dangerous conflict between a couple of the very at-risk kids I teach. To make a longer story short, I needed to keep this thing from escalating, from involving older ‘homies’ with the very real probability of guns, knives, crowbars and tire irons (all of which I had seen happen in other situations). So having failed to get either side to back off, I turned the two warring factions over to my team of student Micro leaders. After several long sessions behind closed doors, they not only resolved the problem, but reconciled old friendships! They did what I couldn’t. This whole story became the Introduction to the book, which by the way, can be read online at the publisher’s website for The Dolphin: www.great-ideas.org/dolphint.htm .

But back to the actual dolphin in question. I mention this averted crisis to set in relief how much I wanted to find a way to share Micro and how well it had worked for me. It happened that in the film we saw, one particular story arc really gripped me. There was an obviously scarred dolphin who lived alone—unusual for these communal animals—and a man who befriended him and so swam out to greet the dolphin each day. They slowly developed a bond as the man gained the dolphin’s trust. They would even play with toys the swimmer took with him. It occurred to me that the kids I happen to teach, and probably those of many other teachers, are also often scarred. They may be slow to trust, slow to bond with adults, slow to believe that very much goodness will come their

way. Or maybe they're just normal kids: sometimes goofy, unfocused, or lazy. No matter what the kid brings to the classroom, kids and adults are from different worlds, just as the man and dolphin were. Yet as these two co-terrestrials learned to swim together in a slow circle—to do the dance of the dolphin—they developed an understanding and ability to work together.

Irene: Before we get any further into the interview, I would like to know what you feel is different between the teaching concepts now as compared to when you were a student.

Mark: The atmosphere in education when I began in 1989-90 was completely different. Mandated standardized curricular objectives and its enforcer, high stakes testing, were only ideals on the horizon. Like all ideals, at the time they sounded, well, *ideal*. Since then, the government has made these legal mandates, complete with sanctions for students and educators who 'fail' to clear whatever standardized bar some powerful non-educators have set. In other words, the ideals have become law. But ideals rarely do well in the real world. Idealism and realism turn out to be very different. And so today, in trying to implement this ideal, we have teaching that is much more restricted—in some cases actually scripted for the 'teacher' to read verbatim—and sanctions that in effect set up a gigantic 'Gotcha' for students who go all the way through K-12 grades, only to be told they have failed a final exit exam and won't get the diploma which seemed a certainty when they gleefully began kindergarten. The trump card to silence critics of this standardization has become, 'America must become more competitive in the world market.' But my question then is, 'Even at the expense of throwing away 20%, or 30%, or for some minority communities 50% of our children?' In other words, the art of teaching is pretty much dead without the infusion of some very creative individuals. Micro classroom management intends, and I believe succeeds, in reintroducing creativity into classrooms while still meeting legal mandates.

Irene: You talk about four possibilities for how each person is uniquely gifted. Tell us about these possibilities.

Mark: This is really the subject of my first book, *Lessons from the Hawk*, but since it is also a key to Micro working well, let me give an overview. Maybe the easiest way to understand the concept is that a hawk circling a field passes through four different perspectives, one every 90 degrees, or quarter turn, of the circle. Without giving away how the hawk and the development of the four learning perspectives came about, I'll just say that I attended a workshop for mentor teachers in which the idea of four distinct sub audiences existed within every whole audience. These four sub groups each had a very different question in mind which—being foremost in their own minds—they expected to be answered at the outset, as the entry point for them to learn the subject (even though most people don't know there are others, and can't understand why *their* compelling interrogative is not always addressed first). These four subsets (and I count each class of students as an 'audience') can each be represented by a symbolic profession and a correlating interrogative. There are those who may be called Professors and want the straight facts, who first ask *What?* What are the facts of the subject, the key components and concepts? Then there are those we might symbolically call Troubleshooters or Scientists, and who want to know *How* or *Why?* something works. These first two sub audiences are fairly traditional in their expectations of school. They like, and so often thrive in, school the way we've always done it. Then we get to some less conventional ways of approaching learning. The third symbolic profession is the Inventor or Innovator who immediately begins asking *What if?* You have the facts of the Civil War? That's good, but what if...this had happened, or that had been different? The final handle we might use is that of the Guide or Communicator. These learners want/need to know *So what* does

the Civil War have to do with us, today? This may seem a surly approach on the surface, but actually it's not a bad question. Still, these latter two unconventional learning outlooks/expectations have landed many students in trouble in school, when in reality they were just being themselves. Micro as a system of classroom management as outlined in *The Dance of the Dolphin*, allows all four types to be true to themselves, and still meet the standards of the teacher or the state.

Irene: Traditional teachers may disagree with some of your thoughts and it may not be so easy to convince them of your concepts. What suggestions do you have to convince them to think differently?

Mark: Long ago I stopped trying to persuade anyone that my way of doing anything was the best. 'You should' is not a part of my vocabulary when I talk to other adults. For me, part of the art of teaching is to allow the individual to find what works for them and build on that, and that includes when I teach other teachers. To switch gears, you may know I'm also a martial arts instructor. In that venue my goal for each student is to help them learn which of the many things taught and available will work best for them. In the arts, a philosophy usually attributed to Bruce Lee is to 'take the best and leave the rest.' So, if a traditional or established teacher is happy with their practice, if they feel they are reaching every student, then they shouldn't need to search for anything more. But if they have one student, or a small group—usually in the back of the room—which is disruptive, obnoxious, and probably failing the class, my book offers some solid, doable, proven ideas.

Irene: You challenge the teachers to organize their classrooms to take advantage of the four perspectives of learning. Give us some ideas of how a classroom would look like.

Mark: During individualized academics, each of the learning perspectives would be encouraged to begin their study with their interrogative in mind. Answer that first, and then the rest will be easier. When we do group or team projects, the teams can be organized by symbolic profession (all inventors together, for example) and given the assignment of teaching the class part of the material from their perspective. Or, the teams could be grouped heterogeneously, with a representative from each 'profession' on the team in order to produce a well-rounded final project.

Irene: You have another book "Lessons from the Hawk" that is a precursor to "Classroom Management." Tell us what one can learn from reading it.

Mark: I have pretty much answered this, but in short *The Hawk* gives details for how to achieve curriculum that works for all, while *The Dolphin* outlines how to set up the class structure so it works for all. In my view, the ideas in each can work alone, or they can make a great set for any teacher's practice. They certainly have done so for my own teaching.

Irene: Thank you very much Mark for giving us insight on how classroom environment can be changed to accommodate a variety of learning perspectives. Is there anything else that you would like to tell our reading audience about yourself or your book?

Mark: Well, Irene, I don't want to make this about me. That's never been much of a priority. But if someone has found an idea or two which may help them with kids in their classroom or even at home, then that's what gets me excited. If anyone wants to know more about the book or related ideas and resources (articles, etc.), a couple of good starting points would be the publisher's site: www.great-ideas.org/dolphin.htm (also has ready-made supplementary materials and copies of the SOS to download), or my personal

site www.HarmoniousWarrior.com through which I can also be contacted, as well as through the blog offered on Reader's Views [Irene, please correct/put in web address for me]. Thanks, Irene, and a heartfelt thanks to all your readers, for the opportunity to share what's worked for me, and some of my passion for helping kids.