# Constructivist Discipline for a Student-Centered Classroom

**Daniel Helman, Winkle Institute: A Group of Independent Scientists, CA**

*Helman, Ph.D. Sustainability Education, holds a CA adult school credential and is Founder/Executive Director of a 501(c)(3) research institute for independent scientists.*

**Abstract**
School discipline remains authoritarian in the USA despite the superficial adoption of student-centered, constructivist lesson delivery. The issue may be lack of ideas for how to conduct constructivist discipline. Three novel activities are presented for classroom discipline that may close this gap. All three present discipline in a manner that is easy for a student to perform, thus increasing the likelihood of compliance. At the same time, these three are also demonstrably enriching, chosen to promote skills development.

**Introduction**
Groups—whether family groups, schools, informal groups of friends, relatives, or more formal associations—are primary locations of acculturation (Dovidio et al., 2011). Habits of language and thought, preferences for food and art, goals and ideas: these all can be found in primary social settings (Lillard et al., 2011). While many of these are of concern to those who have taken on the mantle of the teaching profession, it is school culture that we as teachers often feel most responsible for. This responsibility is a feature of the profession: the habits that we model for our students are an integral part of the culture at a school.

Effective discipline strategies are essential to the classroom teacher for creating the kind of culture wherein student learning can flourish in a variety of challenging circumstances. This paper is meant to fill in the gap, the lack of progressive, student-centered discipline techniques that ought to be available in the current literature on pedagogy. What follows is a brief background of the history of the problem, and then an introduction to three techniques that can be adopted in the classroom, plus strategies for teachers to develop their own. This short offering can serve as the starting point for a larger movement towards more effective (and playful) teaching based on constructivist discipline.

**Background**
Learning venues have been transformed to student-centered, experiential havens in the United States—at least in theory—since the critical assessment of authoritarian teaching styles and the introduction of constructivist theory, whose groundwork was laid by Jean Piaget's writings (Wadsworth, 1996). Materials and activities have been redesigned and a positive outcome has been planned for (Duffy & Jonassen, 2013).

Yet, outcomes are not as high as one might hope. Children are being left behind. For example, Tremblay et al. (1992) reported that poor school achievement is a necessary causal factor in the progression of delinquency in students from first grade to age 14. Achievement is not rising for all children (Monroe, 2005).

The leadership modeled by teachers, that is, how they run their classrooms and what they use for discipline—this leadership style is predominantly authoritarian (Harber, 2015).  For example, an observer in classrooms will see disciplinary rules placed prominently in nearly every public school class in the country.  They are associated with classroom management (Thornberg, 2008).  One starts to ponder:  Is this really a constructivist school culture?

There is no room for creativity in discipline (Skiba & Knesting, 2001).  Public school discipline relies on standardization, and entire school districts pull together to make sure that children who cause disturbances are prevented from participating in learning (time out) or physical education (recess loss), for example. Consequences progress with calls to parents (perhaps causing shame at home) for further disturbance, and, ultimately, the disturbing student is suspended and then expelled.  Moreover, the consequences are not evenly applied (Morrison et al., 2001).  This is not a student-centered approach.

Instead of focusing on student needs, the predominant discipline strategy effectively seems to say, "Let someone else care for the difficult children.  They can go to other schools where corporal punishment or other strict discipline is practiced, and perhaps will end up in jail or prison.  It's not our problem.  As teachers, we are doing what works.  We need to use these types of consequences.  There's really no way to teach effectively without them.  There must be discipline in classrooms."

Note that even if the public is dissatisfied, the general approach is one of keeping the authoritarian discipline in place, and focusing on other aspects of school culture with a behaviorist lens instead—for example, using an approach called *school-wide positive behavior supports* (Sugai & Horner, 2002).  But the discipline itself stays the same: authoritarian.

This traditional approach to classroom discipline may not be useful in the long term.  It is not clear why the disciplinary frameworks need to be as they are (Martinez, 2009).  Discipline is obviously not developmentally appropriate if students are being prevented from learning, for example, during a suspension.  Traditional disciplinary approaches are also not in line with constructivism nor with student-centered learning.  Yet, we as teachers are in lockstep as a profession, enamored with a discipline strategy that is disconnected from our curriculum design principles.

**Three Examples of Student-Centered Discipline**
It is not hard to create developmentally appropriate disciplinary frameworks (Osher et al., 2010).  As a substitute teacher in public schools, I have developed student-centered disciplinary actions in all of my classrooms.  They work.  The classroom mood is as bright as one may hope for.

> (1) <u>Assign drawing as a consequence</u>.
> If a student is disruptive, I'll invite them to make a drawing for me.  For a string of disruptive remarks or actions in quick succession, I can invite an equal number of drawings that are owed to me as a disciplinary consequence. The subject matter is up to the student.
>
> For example, if I walk into a classroom for the first time, and a student makes some (silly) comment about my being bald, and the classroom erupts into laughter, I am very easily able to maintain a kind and bright demeanor and say that the student owes me a picture.  They will likely say something like "Huh? What are you talking about?" and in response to the "Huh?" I can

say they owe me two pictures, and to the "What are you talking about?" I can say that they owe me three.  Usually the count will approach five or so before that first student settles down and listens indeed to find out what I am talking about.  It is the upward progression of the count that gets them to stop, as with any progressive discipline. Once they have settled down, I can offer them a pencil or pen and paper; I make sure always to have paper and a writing implement available.

Notice what has happened in the classroom so far.  The other students have seen the person in authority dealing with disruption in a constructive way, and instead of being upset, there is work that comes out of the interchange.  Second, the students see that the person in authority is willing to give their own resources to make sure that students can accomplish whatever it is that a student is tasked to do.  The cost of a box of a dozen plastic mechanical pencils is minimal, not more than two or three dollars.  Having students see that I can provide for their needs answers a pressing question about whether I really am *in loco parentis.*  Third, drawing a picture is easy.  Where some tasks in the classroom may be above the skills of some of the students, the discipline really ought never be.  It should be something that a student can accomplish without a second thought.   I want that, because I want students to comply with me as I give them assignments.  I want them to be able to trust me—that the work I give them is feasible.  How important it is that the discipline should be particularly easy to accomplish!  It allows the unsettled student to easily say yes.  They can do what I am asking of them.  And then, as a consequence, order is restored in the classroom.  Student nerves are settled.  I am a teacher.  My students want me to be the one who is in charge.  Using a constructivist discipline strategy and a playful spirit allows all of my students to see that easily.  And I always praise student work when they hand it to me.

Note that several drawings (as consequences of disruption) can be assigned without causing harm to a child.  I can *up the ante* as much as I need to.  The work is easy enough that students can be assured that they will not fail at it.  Drawing works fine motor skills and the imagination.  It is a wonderful tool to place in one's disciplinary skillset as a teacher.  It is not hard to convince a student that it would be in their best interest to draw something (anything!) for you.  And once they do, your authority as a teacher has been reinforced in front of the rest of the class, and in a manner that demonstrates that you care about learning.

(2) Assign writing out the lyrics to a song as a consequence.
The following works particularly well when students are unsettled and not focused on the classroom, for example, as students are returning from lunch and their thoughts are still on the joys of outdoor play.  I've never had this fail to bring a smile and a peaceful resolution to difficulty.  Also, it relies on a students' own musical interests and reinforces them.

A student is being disruptive.  I can walk over and ask them politely to write the lyrics to a song that they know.  It can be any song.  It is their choice.  I will give them a pencil and paper if they lack these.  I encourage them to think of a song, and let them alone to their task once they have started.

Like drawing, this consequence can be assigned without causing harm to students. While the lesson proceeds, the student in question will be imagining a song while they write, and this will bring their focus to a meditative place for them and allow for their transition to a classroom-ready frame of mind. I do try to make this consequence open-ended, and accept whatever lyrics are written. I learn about my students this way—about their tastes and cultural affiliations. In the process, the class settles in and the lesson proceeds with all students present.

(3) <u>Assign large-motor tasks to a student to perform outside the classroom</u>.
This is a bit risky. I've let a student out of a class, with the assignment to make a map of a certain section of the school. They did the work, and their day was perfectly fine, but the project could easily have been a bust. I've only done this once, and it was with a student who confided with me that they really, really could not stay in the class. There was something going on in their life that was major, and they needed the time alone. Again, the work I'd assigned as a consequence wasn't harmful to them, and it built up a level of trust that was beautiful.

These are the three types of discipline that I have employed commonly as a substitute teacher in primary and secondary grades. They are progressive and also form a sequence: the second is more calming than the first, and the third is more calming than the second. The crux is to find something that a student wants to do and that will help them to settle down. If I ask them to do something that they already want to do, it is likely that I can maintain the relationship I have with my students that will allow them to do excellent, creative work.

As a teacher, I enjoy being creative. Many of us do. It would be appropriate for classroom discipline to be creative as well. It is arguably the most important aspect of learning (Emmer & Stough, 2001). It ought to be developmentally-appropriate—and up to the teacher to develop their own style of discipline (Sutton & Wheatley, 2003). This is feasible within a constructivist farmework.

**Discussion**
The discipline strategies described above are typically at odds with official policy in many school districts (Hargreaves, 2017). There is often some leeway in devising classroom discipline as a teacher, but the choice ultimately can be countermanded from above. Implementation is a team sport.

Traditional teaching need not be abandoned in favor of a technology-first model (Reigeluth, 2016). Having run many very creative classrooms myself, I can attest that there is a wonderful joy that can be present when a group of people are working together in the same space with learning on the agenda. Well-run classrooms are a joy to behold.

At issue is how student-centered discipline might work in a variety of settings (Tomlinson, 2014). In truth, more data are needed, as are administrators and teachers willing to experiment with the notion that discipline ought to be: (1) easy for the student to perform, (2) developmentally enriching, (3) progressive, so a teacher can *up the ante* if needed, (4) based on students' interests, (5) designed to allow the teacher to stay in charge, and (6) foster creativity and play in the classroom. This is not too much to ask for. It is not as difficult as it may seem. Really only the first two points need be focused on, since if a teacher devises something that is easy for a student to do and developmentally enriching, the rest of the points come as a consequence.

Thus a strategy for a teacher to adopt this type of student-centered discipline is first to imagine several activities that are easy for a student to perform and developmentally enriching. The details can arise from this list. It is hoped that the reader will see this as an exercise that is feasible.

Two motivational issues finally emerge: (1) that discipline strategies in public schools are authoritarian generally in the USA and other countries; and (2) administrative leadership has been unsuccessful in placing education at the forefront globally. A prescription is offered: developmentally-appropriate (constructivist) discipline ought to be fostered in the classroom. Student outcomes globally ought to improve. How could they not, if students and teachers are doing what they love?

**Conclusion**

The ideas presented herein are meant as food for thought. They can help to inspire a change in a classroom's culture, and from that change one may imagine stronger educational outcomes for some students. The disciplinary strategies described in the text are based on the idea that students construct their own knowledge, and that disciplinary problems may arise from lack of internal or external resources. Thus creating disciplinary strategies that are easy for students to perform—and are developmentally enriching—ought to be given more attention both by teachers working out how best to run their classrooms, and by administrators who wish to help teachers become as effective as they can be. The aim is for students to succeed, and they can if given the resources and scaffolding to do so.

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