There is strong evidence to suggest that classroom management is the most pressing challenge in American schools today; many of the education problems we see appearing on the front pages of newspapers and magazines can be traced directly back to it. The following paper explores this growing issue and the developments that are driving it, pinpointing diverse classrooms, the rise of the so-called “digital native,” and unprecedented, rapid shifts in culture as three of the principle problems that are making it difficult for educators to properly manage the contemporary classroom. The paper finally offers professional development as the most effective strategy for solving the problems of classroom management, and outlines the features that educators should look for when choosing PD to deal with them.

**Classroom Management: A Bigger Problem than You Might Think**

It’s no secret that many American schools are in trouble, with challenges you’d recognize from the headlines of any newspaper—sliding test scores, a lack of funding, widening achievement gaps—the list could go on. However, perhaps the most crippling of all the problems that schools face today is one that often flies under the radar in the media, but cuts right to the core of the student/teacher relationship. One statistic in particular highlights the damage that this problem is doing to schools.

“Within 5 years,” explains Dr. Carol Cummings of Seattle-Pacific University, “schools lose 50 percent of new teachers, and there is some evidence that the 50 percent that are leaving are some of our best and our most talented.”

50 percent! This means that at any given time, only half of a school’s employees have more than a beginner’s understanding of their trade. It’s a wonder that some schools are able to operate at all. And what’s at the bottom of such a phenomenal attrition rate? Is it the poor pay, the in-house politics, or the increasing pressure from accountability programs? The leading cause, surprisingly, is much simpler than any of that.

“Studies are showing that more than any other reason,” Cummings continues, “our teachers are leaving because of discipline and the stress of managing today’s classroom, with today’s kids who have so many different needs.”

And for as much stress as discipline and management can put on a teacher, it’s students who end up suffering when the classroom gets out of hand. Experts who have measured the impact of learning environment on student achievement have consistently found that a myriad of educational problems, from low test scores to elevated dropout rates, can be traced back to a poorly managed classroom.

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2 Ibid
It would be easy to put the lion's share of the blame for discipline issues on students and their families. The truth is, though, that while there has always been a certain segment of children and teens who don’t respond to traditional methods of discipline, the majority of classroom problems can be resolved if the teacher possesses the proper knowledge to handle them.

A teacher’s knowledge, in fact, is among the most critical factors in determining his or her ability to manage a classroom. In discussing the challenge of classroom management, Tracey Sempowicz and Peter Hudson of Queensland University of Technology concur over the importance of teacher knowledge as the centerpiece of good classroom management. They explain that “successful management of student behavior requires a good understanding of students’ emotional, social and moral development,” and site the way that, when it comes to classroom management, teachers young and old benefit most from “deep pedagogical knowledge” gleaned from formalized professional development.3

A Growing Challenge

There are many challenges, of course, that drive the array of problems in education. However, as the up-tick in teacher turnover indicates, underlying all of them is the difficulty that educators are having with even engaging students in the most basic of classroom tasks.

And the problem is growing.

“As opposed to earlier generations, in the last two decades, discipline and classroom management have become some of the top concerns of school.”

Gallup polls over the past 25 years have continually pointed to an increase in discipline problems in the classroom. George Sugai at the University of Connecticut references these polls and asserts that, as opposed to earlier generations, in the last two decades, discipline and classroom management have become some of the top concerns of school. Other researchers go further, citing decades-long shifts in American culture that are continuing to fuel independence and self-awareness, and are bringing behaviors once considered unacceptable and aberrant into the mainstream.

“These cultural changes,” claims Dr. Rowland S. Miller of Sam Houston State University, “have probably made people generally less willing to temper their actions and restrain their impulses in the service of the collective good.”4

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Admittedly, there is nothing more natural than cultural shifts between generations. It’s a story as old as time. However, something about recent cultural movements—be they the continued diversification and globalization of America, the exponential boom in technology, or the democratization of information—has clearly had an impact on schools, and classroom management in particular. The reports that we see coming in from classrooms all over the country citing increased challenges with student behavior aren’t necessarily the result of an increase in “bad seeds,” though—they’re indicative of global shift in human thinking and behavior. Students are only changing as the world changes, and their approach to questions of authority, information, and learning reflect that. If teachers are to be effective classroom managers, they must have a grasp on this fact, and more than a skin-deep understanding of the composition of the new American classroom.

Factors Driving Struggles in the Classroom

Diversity
The first thing to know about classroom management is that you can’t possibly know everything about classroom management. While students will be students, and there are certain behaviors and reactions that can often be counted upon, the fact is that each class, each student, and each situation is unique.

“They fail to see that, just as you wouldn’t fix a leaky faucet or a flat tire with a hammer, not every student can be “fixed” with the same old bag of disciplinary tricks.”

One of the biggest mistakes that educators make when dealing with discipline issues in the classroom is that they use the “every problem a nail” approach to managing students. When educators treat their challenging students as if they were nails, they operate as if each child and each problem were exactly the same. They develop rigid problem solving strategies, and in effect they pound away at every problem in the same way. They fail to see that, just as you wouldn’t fix a leaky faucet or a flat tire with a hammer, not every student can be “fixed” with the same old bag of disciplinary tricks.

Most educators understand this on some level. They know that they teach to a diverse variety of cultures, personalities, and situations, with an equally diverse variety of needs. Regardless, though, of what they know to be true about their classrooms, real life experience is showing that teachers are applying the same, rigid management techniques on almost all of their students. In a study conducted by Poulou and Norwich, data showed that while most educators report preferring more sophisticated and nuanced methods of discipline, the majority, when faced with issues in real time, resort to “reactive” classroom management. More often than not, this type of classroom management manifests itself in practices aimed at immediately removing a disruptive behavior. Reprimands, trips to the

front office, public humiliation and the like are often applied and assumed to be aversive to the student.

However, reactive classroom management, while it has been shown to be successful with a small number of students, is rarely effective throughout the classroom as a whole. In fact, the outcomes of reactive discipline with the majority of students are short-lived, counterproductive, and rarely generalize beyond the circumstances in which the consequence is applied. It is typically not an effective way to manage a classroom over the long-term.

In other words, many teachers are simply falling back on what they know—what they learned as they came up through K-12. These static methods of discipline, while they may have worked in the past and may continue to work with some students, are proving less and less effective in the shifting, diverse contemporary classroom.

New Challenges: The Mind of the Digital Native
As if the increased diversity of the classroom weren’t enough to justify new approaches to management, the last decade has seen a dramatic change in the nature of the child who occupies it. “Today’s students,” says educational leader Marc Prensky, “are changed radically from the generations of students that preceded them...[they] represent the first to grow up with [digital] technology.”

“Digital natives,” explains Prensky “have spent their entire lives surrounded by and using computers, videogames, digital music players, video cams, cell phones, and all the other toys and tools of the digital age... [and as a result] think and process information fundamentally differently from their predecessors.”

Prensky calls this new generation of students “digital natives,” a phrase that he coined, and that holds considerable cache with thought leaders all over the world. “Digital natives,” explains Prensky “have spent their entire lives surrounded by and using computers, videogames, digital music players, video cams, cell phones, and all the other toys and tools of the digital age... [and as a result] think and process information fundamentally differently from their predecessors.”

The foundation of this idea comes from a growing body of research on the brain, which is finding that, rather than simply static or entropic (decomposing), the human mind is malleable, ever adapting and changing in response to external stimuli. The implications of this new discovery call into question one of the fundamental assumptions that Western scientists and philosophers have held for centuries—namely that everyone, everywhere
in the world, regardless of social or geographic boundaries, possesses the same brain. As New York Times writer Erica Goode puts it, we are discovering that “people who grow up in different cultures do not just think about different things: they think differently.”

To Prensky, and by now most of the leading thinkers in education, this means that the radical shifts in culture that have occurred with the popular advent of digital technology and the internet have, in a very literal way, changed the brains of digital natives. Their psychology and their mental processes have grown out of the digital culture that most of them are immersed in, and their personalities and strengths are reflecting this fact: they are in their comfort zone when multi tasking; they receive and process information with increasing speed; they excel when networked together; they expect to be instantly gratified and frequently rewarded; they possess a strikingly democratic approach to authority, especially as it relates to the disbursal of information.

Unfortunately, if few teachers are modifying their management strategies to better address what they already know about their classes, then much of what is new in students is certainly going unnoticed and unattended to.

This, of course, must change if educators hope to reach their students.

“Knowledge that we gain about our students—how they learn, where they come from, and what they respond to—presents more than just an opportunity to better serve them” says Dr. Linda Leith, an expert on personalized learning. “It places upon us a responsibility to act on that knowledge, to use it to optimize their experiences in our classroom.”

**Changing Challenges: The Law of Exponential Growth**

As time goes by, it is unlikely that our students are every going to grow less complex, and require less individualized classroom management. Quite the opposite, in fact, is true. We should not only expect our students and classroom management challenges to remain complex, but there is little reason to believe that all of it won’t become more complex and more difficult over time. If we accept that the processes of the mind change as they conform to the stimulus of culture, then we can come to few other conclusions.

The reason for this is simple. The major catalyst of cultural change in our time, technology, will continue to develop at an ever-increasing pace. As Ray Kurzweil, renowned thought leader in the field of technology explains:

“Information technology follows an exquisitely predictable, exponential trajectory [...] If I count linearly 30 steps—1,2,3,4,5—I get to 30. If I count exponentially—2,4,6,12—within 30 steps I’m at a billion. It makes a dramatic difference.”

“To illustrate, about 40 years ago Gordon Moore saw that there was exponential growth in the power of semi conductors. Basically, every 2 years we could put twice as many components on a chip. We built something that fits in your pocket over the first forty

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9 Dr. Lisa Leith (director of content, School Improvement Network), in discussion with author, February 2012
years, and in the next 25 years we’ll go from building something that fits into your pocket to something that’s the size of a blood cell.

“The reason that information technology grows exponentially is that we use the latest technology to create the next, so each new generation of technology grows exponentially in capability, and the speed of that process accelerates over time.”

Even teenagers, our own students, in their short lifetimes can see how much more quickly technology moves now than it did five years ago. What they can’t see, however, and what educators must be cognizant of, are the ways that those technologies change culture, and likewise, the way they change our students.

“New technologies,” says Neil Postman, “change what we mean by ‘knowing’ and ‘truth;’ they alter those deeply embedded habits of thought which give to a culture its sense of what the world is like—a sense of what is the natural order of things, of what is reasonable, of what is necessary, of what is inevitable, of what is real.”

“Before their careers come to an end, many teachers in classrooms today will very likely see multiple paradigm shifts in technology and culture that will deeply change the way their students think, and require new ways of reaching them and managing a classroom.”

As new technologies alter the structure of human brain, as they reconstruct “knowing,” “truth,” and the way we conceptualize reality, and as they do so at an ever-accelerating pace, educators will have a daunting task before them. If the internet, in little more than a decade, has so strongly impacted the thinking of the current generation, what might the next decade, or the decade after that hold? Before their careers come to an end, many teachers in classrooms today will very likely see multiple paradigm shifts in technology and culture that will deeply change the way their students think, and require new ways of reaching them and managing a classroom.

Solutions

So many students with so many problems, and so much change in the wind and on the horizon—it’s enough to overwhelm anyone, and it truly is too much for any one educator to manage alone. Teachers need help. They need leaders and mentors who provide them with the means to learn what they do not know, and the training to assist them in implementing the lessons they learn. They need the widest access to the greatest variety of resources possible. They need powerful, comprehensive professional development to help them manage the increasingly complex American classroom.

10 Ray Kurzweil, interview by Barry Ptolemy, Transcendent Man, Film, 2009.
The good news is that as the world has changed, professional development has changed along with it. The traditional, cattle-call PD experience, with teachers hauled out of class to attend a single seminar or a lecture may have worked in its day, but by now, is long outdated. Innovations in relevant, personalized professional development have emerged to replace old models, but, as with so many things, all PD experiences are not created equal. When researching your own PD solution to classroom management challenges, the following considerations will be crucial to selecting the best option.

**A Wide Variety of Content to Meet Diverse Student Needs**
As this paper has underlined, every student is unique, and every classroom diverse, and the optimal professional development experience will take this account.

One of the major weaknesses of traditional, live PD is that a single speaker or a single seminar can only address a handful of topics at a time. Statistically, the chances of each educator in the room receiving training on the issues relevant to him or her are very low. Even when it comes to classroom management, while most teachers face some type of discipline challenge, it is unlikely that a live speaker will have the capacity to give every participant the personalized type of experience he or she needs to manage unique, diverse students.

“As they manage different students with different challenges, there is no reason that your teachers shouldn’t have access to every PD resource they could possibly need. You should not have to settle for anything less.”

When looking for professional development to aid teachers in classroom management make sure to find a solution with an extensive variety of resources—one that teaches different approaches to the topic of classroom management, and features a number of experts speaking on the subject. Advances in technology have made it possible to give educators access to an expansive type of training never dreamed of until few years ago. As they manage different students with different challenges, there is no reason that your teachers shouldn’t have access to every PD resource they could possibly need. You should not have to settle for anything less.

**A Wide Variety of Services to Meet Diverse Educator Needs**
In addition to providing a range of content, quality professional development should also deliver more than one service—the very best professional development companies will give you access to quite a few. In the same way that students have unique sets of needs, teachers themselves learn in different ways. Some do well in a classroom setting and some need personal guidance; some prefer hands-on, in-class help, while others prefer to simply read and learn.

While a wide variety of content will provide the answers to your teachers’ classroom management challenges, the method of delivery will guarantee that those answers stick
and are integrated into classroom practice. Look for a professional development company that covers all bases, with platforms that allow teachers to work alone; collaborate; get one-on-one, in class mentoring; receive instruction in theory, and watch other teachers in a practical, hands-on setting.

**Constantly Updated Material**
As we have outlined, the world that shapes student culture and learning is changing at a dizzying pace. What we know today, within the next few years will be old news. Some of the traditional approaches to classroom management will continue to be relevant and effective, while others will go the way of the blackberry and the videocassette tape. To maintain proactive classroom management strategies in a digital age, teachers need to remain current.

“As in many industries over the last decade, most professional development producers have been blindsided by the effect that digital technology has had on their world, and are frantically playing a game of catch up.”

To this end, educators will do well to select a professional development platform that evolves along with technology, culture, and student needs. Educators should seek out PD systems that are innovative, and produced by leaders and groups who place a premium on staying ahead of the developmental curve. As in many industries over the last decade, most professional development producers have been blindsided by the effect that digital technology has had on their world, and are frantically playing a game of catch up. They are realizing, some of them too late, that digital technology is much more than a trend, and that it’s impact on education is, and will continue to be, enormous. From now on, the best PD developers will be the ones who remain up-to-date, in touch with current culture and market trends.

**Online, On-Demand**
While providing extensive professional development offerings online isn’t the only sign that a PD producer is ahead of the curve, it is certainly the clearest indicator that he or she is on the right track. The web has proven the most effective of all professional development platforms for a number of reasons. To begin with, it is the only form of content delivery that allows PD producers to stay absolutely current, posting videos and other content as they are needed, delivering the most timely, relevant content on a day-to-day basis.

In addition, the more that is asked of educators, the less time they are afforded to develop as professionals. Between teaching, grading, lesson planning, and staff meetings, teachers have little opportunity to tend to their own professional development needs. With online PD, educators can access material anytime, anywhere: between classes, in the teachers’ lounge, at home, or on the bus. Online PD goes anywhere a teacher goes, and allows them freedom to choose when they learn.
Add to all of this the fact that online professional development allows teachers more leeway in choosing how they learn, by virtue of the simple fact that an online platform has room for more material than any other. Teachers have the opportunity to choose between massive amounts of content, available at the click of a button. This is, of course, to the advantage of the teacher struggling with classroom management, along with every other kind of educational challenge.

Collaboration
With the advent of digital technology, teachers no longer have to be restricted to just the video, audio, and textual offerings available on even the most comprehensive of professional development platforms. If a PD platform allows it, and the best always will, educators can have access to colleagues all over the world—voices that can offer endless suggestions, wisdom, and practical strategies not available through other channels.

This is why online professional development communities are fast becoming one of the most critical supplements to existing PLCs. Online PD communities are especially helpful when dealing with difficult, complex challenges like student discipline and classroom management. While no two students and situations are exactly alike, belonging to a vast, worldwide community increases the statistical likelihood that struggling teachers will find colleagues who have dealt with very similar students and very similar situations, and can offer powerful, incisive advice. When looking for a professional development solution to your classroom management needs, make sure to give your teachers access to the incredible resources that an online professional community can offer.

**School Improvement Network: The Ultimate Classroom Management Solution and Professional Development Solution**

Founded in 1991 by teachers, School Improvement Network is the worldwide leader in online professional development. In 2007, School Improvement Network changed the professional development industry by putting its entire library of resources online. Always looking forward, always working to provide educators with exactly what they need, exactly when they need it, the company helps hundreds of thousands of educators better reach their students every day.

“As the industry leader, School Improvement Network possess the deepest, most comprehensive library of professional development resources for educators available, covering more topics and offering more videos (1,800 and counting) than anyone else—all filmed in real classrooms, documenting best practices.”
As the industry leader, School Improvement Network possess the deepest, most comprehensive library of professional development resources for educators available, covering more topics and offering more videos (1,800 and counting) than anyone else—all filmed in real classrooms, documenting best practices. And, with the largest online community of verified educators in the world (800,000 and counting), School Improvement Network opens its clients’ doors to schools all over the country, giving them access to one another, and helping become better together.

And, as it is one of the most pressing topics in education, School Improvement Network has an extensive library of classroom management tools, prepared by some of the top experts in the field of education. Teachers can learn how to better manage their classrooms by watching videos of best practices, participating in the online community, or engaging one on one with School Improvement Network experts who fly to schools all over the country to conduct on-site training and lend in-class assistance.

To learn more about how School Improvement Network can help you solve your classroom management challenges, visit schoolimprovement.com/pd360 and sign up for a free 30-day trial of PD 360, School Improvement Network’s premier professional development platform.