Rick Morris
NewManagement.com RickMgmt@gmail.com

Excerpted from Eight Great Ideas, Chapter 3: The Top Ten Things I Said

Tell me this doesn't chap your hide just a bit:

Every student in your classroom is in production mode completing an assignment. Everyone, that is, except Calvin. He's just sitting there. Doin' nothin'. Not a care in the world.

Your Inner Voice

TRYING TO KEEP A LID ON EMOTIONS:

--Sweet biscuits! He's just sitting there doing nothing and feelin' okay. Well, not in this classroom!--

And before you know it, the frustration is verbalized to everyone.

Your Outer Voice

JACKED UP A FEW DECIBELS:

Calvin! Why are you just sitting there? Why aren't you working on the assignment?

A chastened silence falls over the room.

Calvin

LOOKING SOMEWHAT OFFENDED:

I already finished the assigment. I was about to write some entries in my journal.

Oops.

So, TRY THIS.

It's a Bill Glasser strategy I used for years with great success. It's not much more than a guided conversation you have with the student in which three questions are asked and answered.

1. *What are you doing?*
2. *What should you be doing?*
3. *What are you going to do now?*

BRAIN Child

These three simple questions will, in many cases, turn the student's attention away from random Limbic brain input and direct their attention to their PreFrontal Cortex (PFC) agenda.

Often, inappropriate student behavior comes from the Limbic brain. Whether it's being off-task or class clown, most emotional motivators get in the way of student achievement.

On the other hand, a learning agenda comes mostly from the PFC.

The back-story is the not-so-invisible struggle between the two brains. In the classroom, off-task usually means "Limbic influence." On-task means activity which aligns with a PFC agenda.

What are you doing? means "are you engaged in the appropriate learning lesson (a PFC activity) or are you under the influence of your Limbic brain?" This question helps the student stop whatever they are doing to take a look inside to see where their thoughts are.

What should you be doing? means "can your PFC determine what you should be doing versus any irrelevant Limbic input you may be experiencing?" This question helps the student immediately distinguish between input from the Limbic or from the PFC.

What are you going to do now? means "can your PFC take precedence over your Limbic brain and keep your focus on the next step of the learning lesson?" This is the important question of the three: does the student know what to do next? If they don't, now the teacher knows what kind of help the student needs.

By asking these questions gently – student fear of humiliation inhibits the learning process – the teacher can reach the student's PFC without awakening a counterproductive Limbic response.

Len Torres is a national-award-winning designer who has created a brain model based on the latest researches in neurology. This model begins with the discovery that every human has two decision centers in their brain: the older, basic Limbic system and the unique, human PreFrontal Cortex. How these two centers harmonize (or not) has enormous impact on human behavior.

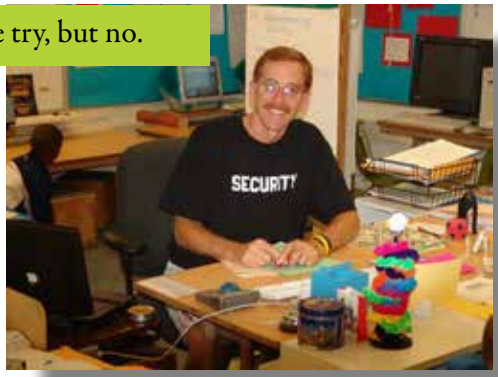
Had I merely asked what he was doing, Calvin would have answered, "I finished my math. I'm working on my journal." I would have then been able to say, "Good choice." But I didn't ask and thereby lost an opportunity to improve our relationship. Dang.

Step 1: "What are you doing?"
To avoid a rush to judgement, I learned to take just a moment and find out what's really going on.

Mr. Morris
Seeing Calvin doing nothing and approaching his desk:
What are you doing?

Now then, if Calvin were indeed off-task when questioned, there's a good chance he would not provide a verbal response. Instead, he would suddenly engage himself in the independent math assignment and hope that his change in behavior will deflect the question and the questioner.

Nice try, but no.



Mr. Morris
Not getting a verbal response from Calvin:
Calvin. Talk to me. What were you doing when I walked up to your desk?

I want to get him to say, "Nothing." A part of helping students improve their behavior is helping them see what's getting in their way. And in the present situation, being off-task is getting in the way of Calvin becoming a better student.

Calvin
Reluctantly:
Nothin'.

Step 2: "What should you be doing?"
To be fair, it's possible–not likely, but within the realm of possibility–that he doesn't know what he should be doing. Maybe he just got back from working with the resource teacher. Maybe he just returned to school from a dental appointment. Maybe, just maybe, he *has* finished

the math assignment. He's basking in the glow of the moment while trying to figure out what to do next.

Mr. Morris
Patiently:
What should you be doing?

Calvin
Realizing that further resistance is futile:
My math.

Step 3: "What are you going to do now?"

This third question, I now realize, is actually a Robert MacKenzie-type question.† It's a transfer-of-ownership question. It's a question which requires the student to become involved in the decision-making process.

> *Bonus:* "What are you going to do now?" has the additional benefit of providing an opportunity for the student to engage in a bit of face-saving, i.e., he will be the one to get himself back on-task and not the teacher. You always want to keep your eyes open for those character-building opportunities when students can be led from the drudgery of obedience to the bright light of self-determination.

Mr. Morris
With a firm yet safe touch:
What are you going to do now?

Calvin
Looking to make the best of a bad situation:
My math.

Mr. Morris
With a smile and a pat on the shoulder:
Good choice.

And with that, I'd walk away. I wouldn't need to stand over him to make sure he got back to work. I'd just wander away to help someone else and keep a casual eye on Calvin until Max, the timer, beeped for us to move on to our next activity.

Not only does this dialogue help to make me a safer teacher, it also begins to work in my favor as time goes by. Because I use the dialogue so frequently, my students will eventually be able to anticipate the three questions. Consequently, it will become possible to get Calvin back on-task by sending a puzzled look his way.

Calvin
Seeing the 'What Are You Doing?' look from Mr. Morris:
-- Uh, oh. Here he comes. What am I doing? What should I be doing? What am I going to do now? --

Without a word from me, he can get himself to return to working on his assignment. It was the repetitive use of dialogue, though, that set the stage for me to help him develop his growing sense of accountability and self-determination: a worthy outcome.

Avoiding the Rush to Judgement, Take Two

I was in the classroom one day at lunchtime when some girls came into the room to hang out. Within a minute or so, they were at the whiteboard with the markers.† Since we never use the whiteboards as "toys," I felt I needed to address their poor choice.

Mr. Morris
Strong but soft:
Girls, you know better than that.

Spokesgirl for the Group
Turning to me innocently:
Oh, we were working on the list of names for the social committee you asked us to organize.

Ouch.

Mr. Morris
Pausing long enough to remove my foot from my mouth:
Girls, I apologize. I should have asked what you were doing. Thanks for remembering to take care of the committee list.

Here's what I finally had to ask myself.

What have I got to lose by asking?

Answer:

Actually, there's nothing to lose and everything to gain.

† Robert MacKenzie is the author of *Setting Limits in the Classroom*. You can buy the second edition of this great book for a buck. [half.ebay.com]