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Learning to keep your cool

Oh dear. You haven't even started your career and you're already joining the ranks of the perfectionists. One day you could be a headteacher, lying awake all night clutching a bottle of vodka, because you made a tiny error the day before.

(Ted Wragg, *Times Educational Supplement*,
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Panic and perfectionism

The teaching profession is one where you can easily become a victim of perfectionism. Read any of the National Curriculum and standards for teaching and it all looks like a blueprint for a perfect education. Up and down the country there are teachers doing their best to teach as well as they can, most of them striving to do better. The sensible ones recognize that not every pupil can be interested all the time and not every lesson can grab the attention of bored students. During an average week in front of your class, you might teach one or two brilliant lessons and some that will be fairly good ones. The rest can frustrate you because they do not go as well as you would like. Some trainees and newly-qualified teachers worry mightily if they make the slightest mistake or panic if their students look bored. After a few successful lessons, they crank up expectations that lessons *should* be brilliant all the time, and students *should not* be bored.

The classic 'should' has its roots in an irrational belief that perfection is possible. When you work with children, not everything is within your control. A good deal of it is, but many students arrive in your classroom already overloaded with a number of difficulties which are not of your making. Some may have a disturbed and difficult background, or have had a late night. Others simply dislike any form of authority and do not want to be told what to do by you or anyone else. Some students want to talk, and some want to be left alone to get on with things by themselves. Some arrive already bored and listless.

There are also students who do not have much tenacity and want to get through their day with as little effort as possible. They may like you as a person, but that does not mean that they want to work hard. Occasionally the entire class will arrive and behave like a box of flies, agitated and almost impossible to calm down.

None of this is difficult to believe. The difficult part is understanding just how easy it is to click into a negative perfectionist mode without realizing. The signs are familiar as a dialogue chatters inside your head or is unloaded onto the nearest colleague:

- concentrating on what went wrong long enough to eradicate what went well;
- saying what went well, then adding a negative criticism beginning with 'but';
- feeling a failure if one or two students do not do as you want;
- feeling a failure because a lesson went really badly this time;
- unrealistically thinking that all your high standards can be met all the time;
- using the word 'should' and 'should not' a great deal;
- using absolute phrases such as 'complete disaster', 'never' and 'always';
- forgetting that it is normal for something to go wrong.

Such inner feelings of failure, anger, sadness or upset persist only if you feed them further with a dialogue of criticism. Sometimes it is a miracle that students do anything that teachers want them to do at all. You have a great deal of power in a classroom, but for various reasons your students agree to cooperate or not. Any teacher who tries to interest a class of children does this to see if they will respond and agree to learn something. Most students do, but not all students want to play this great game of life so you will be left with a few who have their own agenda. You can do your best for every student in your class, but it still takes two to learn. Monitor what your students achieve. Monitor how well you organize your teaching but leave aside the negative 'self-talk' or you will have a short career in teaching. Some things can be improved and put right, but there is plenty that is outside your control. There is a world of difference between wanting to teach well and wanting lessons to be brilliant.

How beginners can take 'centre stage'

Imagine what it can be like to stand in front of a class for the first time. Your stomach may feel as if it is somewhere round your neck and your feet are on a tightrope. Meanwhile you are trying to give an impression of confidence and calm. All this on top of the fact that so far, you have not taken charge of anything, only observed the class and helped a few students. You have been a classroom helper, not a real teacher. Students will have formed some impression already of who you are and how you can be approached. You are not likely to face your class without the class teacher being there, so there can be the added pressure of being watched as you take your first class.

Taking centre stage

- Move to a prominent position in the room and stand still with both feet glued to the ground. This needs to be with your back to a wall, typically at the front of the class.
- Tense the outer wall of your stomach slightly as if someone was about to punch you there. It is surprising how slack those outer muscles can go when you are nervous, leaving the inner ones to have their own private party.
- Feel a positive energy coming from the region of your stomach, outwards to the class, radiating warmth and confidence.
- Lower the pitch of your voice but not its volume. If you are anxious, you are likely to raise the pitch to a squeaky level and possibly speak too quietly. When you have gained attention, smile and lower the volume of your voice.

When you take centre stage this is not going to be in the centre of the room because you cannot see enough of the class. You need to provide a fixed focal point, not a confusing one where you explain things while walking round the room, or shuffling from one foot to the other. Students are not going to take much notice of things said as you move about. Feel your feet rooted to the spot and make sure your weight is on both feet. When we are apprehensive we tend to stand with our weight on one foot, probably with the other one ready to run out of the room. (You may need to ask students to move so that you can see them too.) Loss of volume and voice tone can transmit a low expectation that students will do what you ask. You are not talking to a close friend, so keep the voice as businesslike as you can. If ever you are in doubt, slow down, lower the pitch and keep the volume just loud enough for everyone in the class to hear you.

There is no such thing as one way to take centre stage. Some beginners are naturally reserved and others extrovert, but this is by no means any indication of how they will be in a classroom. I have seen shy beginners come alive with children and confident extroverts become very nervous indeed. What is certain is that in taking centre stage, you will need to have a much more public presence than usual. Anyone coming into your classroom should hear you using a public voice and not private whispers to individual students. This is not an excuse to shout, as that would send out the wrong signal. Aim your voice initially to reach the furthest wall from you if you are trying to get the class's attention especially if you are teaching PE or taking a class assembly in the school hall.

In addition, centre stage can be established by being fussy about the physical position of students in the classroom. Teachers who use the device of making sure that everyone can see will quietly move students into view or move them back if they are too near. Left to their own devices, students will often crowd too close or form groups not fully in the teacher's line of sight. For example, young children who are sitting round a table will try often to crawl

to the centre or crowd you. Whenever you pause to organize the students or yourself, you are affirming your centre-stage presence in the classroom. There are plenty of excuses to do this because so much of teaching involves showing students how to use equipment or holding up examples. You also maintain your presence by pausing when students least expect it.

Sustaining your classroom presence

If you are working closely with an individual child, or a small group, pause and deliberately call across the room to a distant student. This has two consequences. It teaches the distant student that you are still in contact even though you are working with an individual. It also shows the individual student that you are going to make them wait long enough to check that other students are still working. When you move on to another student, they have got the message that you are always aware of what else is going on.

You can form a good habit if you take up your central position in the same way each time. Look as if you are trying to gain attention by remaining still, but also look as if you are pleased to start the lesson. A grim aggressive face as you scan the room is counterproductive to your aim of creating a good positive work atmosphere. If you look as if you do not expect to get attention (probably by frowning at the noise going on) you may invite students to continue with their non-attention. Your presence is reinforced by being the person in the room demanding attention, asking questions and fielding replies. Additionally, you may be the person who refocuses attention, summarizes and points to things. All these activities signal to the students who is in charge. If you are active rather than passive, assertive rather than a shrinking violet, you can look and sound like a teacher who has real presence. There is no need to enter the classroom carrying a lighted firework in each hand, but you certainly need to look as if you mean business. You will need more than a smile, and may need to hassle dawdlers, returning to a positive businesslike presence.

Learn to persist until you have students' attention

The most common two problems for a beginner are signalling effectively that you want attention, then making sure that they have eye-contact with your students before continuing. You take centre stage, but your students' attention is elsewhere. You will find that you cannot take centre stage and simply wait. In many instances you cannot signal that you want attention and wait forever. Students will need to be diverted from whatever else they are doing. Some trainees complain that it is impossible to get students to turn towards a whiteboard

or to give their full attention. If you believe that students pay attention with their backs towards you, then you will never get them to pay attention. Insist on full attention from the very first moment that you stand in front of a class, persisting for however long it takes. Why would you want that? When you explain or ask questions, your facial expression is very important, as is your tone of voice. If there is no eye-contact, then having a good rapport with your students is almost impossible. Facial expression, a raised eyebrow or a smile communicate with your students. No student is going to engage with these unless they are actually looking at you. You may not always achieve 100 percent eye-contact, but there are known bad habits that students will display if you ask them to listen without looking.

At worst, eye-contact from students might be a glazed look of inattention, but more likely it indicates some level of involvement. It is not a foolproof signal they are paying attention but it is more convincing than the backs of their heads. At worst, students sit with their backs to the teacher, chatter while the teacher is speaking and fidget with equipment in their hands. Sometimes their idea of paying attention is a reluctant half-turn towards the teacher or board. The general 'under-chatter' then becomes accepted with the teacher's voice loud enough to drown it out. Students fiddle with pencils, paper, or even with another's hairstyle instead of listening, and anything else you care to imagine. Another might wander over to another part of the room for no good reason. Two more might play a subversive touch game of 'You're *it*' and another might construct an abstract piece of origami with scrap paper. Contrast this with students who, in the first few seconds of your teaching, have realized that you meant business and were not prepared to let them continue with their private agenda of non-attention.

Many trainee teachers are quite unused to a public style of speaking to a large group and are surprised to hear the words come out of their mouth. If the signal you give for getting attention is your own voice, then have a consistent, strong way of stopping the class or group. Imagine a typical situation where there is some general class chatter going on, too loud for the teacher to be heard using a normal speaking voice. One teacher's method of signalling is to shout 'Thank you', another might be 'Everybody stop. Things down, and look this way.' Another claps their hands three times and says 'Looking and listening please.' Another taps on a chime bar, another a small bell, and yet another slams a piece of wood on a desk (a little overdramatic but still effective). Give a clear, loud signal, wait and drop the volume of your voice. Make sure if you clap your hands that you speak loudly at the same time otherwise the students may well clap back, mimicking your signal.

You may not need to rush out to buy a gavel, but whatever strong signal you try, you may be sure of one thing. It is not the signal that matters so much as what the students have learned that it *means*. If your signal means nothing to them you can stamp and scream all you like to no effect. If you want to use your voice, your speech signal must be the same each time, generally loud,

followed by a pause, followed by a drop in the volume of your voice. You may even need to rehearse what this means with students, for example:

When I say ... it *means* that you turn round, face me and put everything out of your hands. Push things on your desk away from you so you don't fiddle with them. All eyes this way and ready to concentrate.

Knowing what the signal actually means will work for most children if you are consistent. The time to do all this is the very *first* time you ask a class to pay attention. No need to sound tetchy, but every need to sound businesslike.

I think what I've learned most is to persist. If you do that for long enough, they [students] eventually give in. I might give them grief about losing time, but day-by-day they know I mean what I say. I do sound determined to get attention as well as persisting, and I move on quickly as soon as I have them looking and listening. (Newly-qualified teacher)

Young children are likely to respond to a different approach, but the signal is still a strong one:

I wave a magic wand and this means I want my five wishes. These are: (1) eyes looking at me; (2) ears listening; (3) lips closed; (4) sitting up straight; (5) hands in laps. The children probably think, 'The old bat's waving her wand again', but it does seem to work if you follow it up with praise for those who respond quickly. (Infant school headteacher)

I found that, specifically when on the carpet, instead of just getting the children's attention by nagging or keep saying 'Eyes this way ...' if you carry out a series of actions such as 'Hands on your head, on your knees, touch your nose (these can be more sophisticated depending on the age. For example, 'Put your left hand on your right knee' and so on. Finish with fingers over your lips, lowering the tone and volume of your voice) and 'Hands in your laps ...', I have found this really works, especially at times when children need to sit for long periods of time. (Trainee teacher)

What these last two approaches have in common is that they engage the child's mind, preventing it from wandering. In the physical 'Simon Says' approach, there are quick-thinking actions needed so students become very involved. They are engaged in a lively game so it is difficult not to pay attention. The magic wand works because of what it means. The 'Simon Says' game has other variations, one of which is to get students to put their hand on their T-shirt logo to show they are ready. Next time maybe it will be: 'Put your hand on your right shoulder.' The most mechanistic strategy I ever saw came from a teacher who said: 'Eyes on the ceiling. Eyes on the floor. Eyes on me.' It still worked.

The power of a pause

Technically, the crucial feature of getting attention is to pause after the strong attention signal, and insist until you have eye-contact and all chatter, 'pen-maintenance' and fidgeting has stopped. It is tempting to settle for less (seriously

disturbed students notwithstanding) but in time you will undermine your signal if you give way. Insist, insist and insist by saying the same phrase, such as 'I can't see everyone's eyes.' Pause, repeat the phrase with slight surprise in your voice, and insist. You may not succeed in this every time, but you are developing and honing a basic classroom skill. There is also a curious effect (which I have yet to disprove): if your signal is to clap your hands or bang an object three times, the pace of this has to be right. Three overly rapid sounds really count as one. You need to clap your hands at a pace of one loud sound per second, not four sounds or two sounds and always followed by a one or two-second pause before instructions. I must have explained this signal to trainee teachers hundreds of times, but they still misunderstand. They start their lesson when students are not ready and allow chatter and inattention. Double the amount of time you intend to persist with your strong signal and that will be about right.

A common error some beginners make, when they signal and wait, is to be sucked into responding to questions (diversions again). Resist taking any notice of 'Please Miss, I haven't got a . . .' questions and keep strictly focused. If you want to add a gesture, make a non-verbal 'stop' signal with your hand in front of the child's face. Your 'stop' signal means 'not now'. Logically the last thing you want to do is encourage students to gain your attention when actually you are trying to gain theirs. You need full attention, nothing else. If you put up with under-chatter while you speak loudly, students are going to think that you are willing to compete with them. They will think that you do not mind talking while they talk, or that you are willing to speak even louder so that they can still chatter. Exclude all extra noise, close the door and sometimes even a window to make sure there are no distractions. You can then sense the atmosphere and make listening a priority.

The mid-sentence pause

- Stop mid-sentence and call the student's name.
- Pause and repeat *only the name* until you have attention (ignore a response such as an impolite 'What?' or 'What!' or 'Not doing nuffin').
- Slow down your speech and (possibly) add a hint of gravitas. Be ready for an interruption such as 'Wasn't me!' and override it with, for example, 'Maybe it wasn't, but what are you doing that we don't like?'
- Spell out exactly what you want, emphasizing work, listening, concentrating, thinking. Make this a maximum of 20 seconds, ending with a reminder about the task or need for attention.

Some teachers actually pause for extra effect once they have got attention. They also stretch a mid-sentence pause as long as they can. This is only acting, but it has a strong controlling effect on a class. A teacher who pauses for effect is not

the same as one who pauses and slows the pace of the lesson. Be very careful to keep up a lively pace after pausing or you will lose your momentum.

A pause for effect is a contrast with the pace that goes before and after it. Pausing effectively has the bonus that it can make you appear confidently in charge. When you have gained attention there is a vacuum waiting to be filled. Fill it, and move on or your class will switch to their own agenda.

Persisting is not always waiting

Persist and insist. I know I should do this, but in my case it's become a pace-killing wait. Starting the class by grabbing their attention and creating some excitement before tackling chatting and fidgeting is something I'm going to try. (Trainee teacher)

You see trainees waiting forever and saying things like 'Who remembers our rule about listening?' Then they go through the listening rule again, by which time the mutterings have begun and the attention they want is half-hearted. Why do they do that? You don't see experienced teachers do it, and they are still able to get attention. That's because they move swiftly on when most children are looking, and after a few seconds speak sharply to anyone who still isn't paying attention. The clever ones check again after a few seconds and round up the strays. (Education lecturer)

You probably want to widen the range of your attention-getting skills and will need to think of alternatives to waiting for attention. The key thing is: move it on! You can get serious and wait for attention, but there is also something to be said for taking students by surprise and getting them involved in spite of themselves. The more you leave gaps, the more chance there is to have to discipline students instead of getting down to some teaching.

Gaining attention without waiting forever

Some teachers sweep into the classroom already greeting their students as they move to take centre stage. They look as if they are about to enjoy what they are going to do. They signal for attention and continue loudly while writing on the board. They direct attention by pointing and saying 'Everyone looking at this list of words here' and only then do they turn to look at the class. Waiting for attention has been deferred. Part-way through their explanation, they persist in getting full attention by pausing, scanning the room and rounding up strays by saying something like 'John, Peter, Anna. We've *already* started and I need your attention now.' The pace is brisk. They pause again and ask a question, pause mid-sentence and scan the whole class again for eye-contact. But they still persist until they have attention, gradually raising the concentration level, smiling and continuing. The volume of their voice drops and the session becomes interactive with students being chosen to respond to directions, questions or problems to solve. These teachers engage students before they quite know what has hit them, then stop to round up the strays.

A beginner in the classroom is more likely to signal and wait, but you can try other ways so long as you still persist within the first few minutes. An experienced teacher has already-established routines and expectations. Persisting is not something you do only at the beginning of a lesson. You will need to persist at any point in the lesson should you need students to listen and respond. Stop the lesson dead in its tracks when you want to regain attention.

Persistence and power struggles

Some students want to be the last to give their attention, an irritating event for you as the teacher. Their behaviour can be refusal to give eye-contact, sometimes under-chatter, sometimes a power struggle over equipment. This may be about being the last to close a storage drawer or the very last to put down pens or pencils. Some students (very few in fact) may need to be ignored if they are known to be extreme in their behaviour. Whatever the ploy, very early intervention for the majority of students is more effective than endless patience and a frustrated 'I'm waiting' expression on your face. This might take the form of a sharp reprimand, backed up by a threat of losing five minutes at break or playtime. More likely a threat of losing some opportunity to do something very enjoyable that the rest of the class is going to do will have the desired effect. Give a warning, however, and a choice such as 'You're choosing to lose some of your time if you . . .'. The advantage of appearing to turn this into a choice (which it is not) is that you shift responsibility for the consequences to the child.

Your persistence with dawdlers and power-strugglers needs to have consequences without the class atmosphere becoming negative. It is better to build an early expectation that around 30 seconds is long enough before dawdlers hear you say 'Quickly you two, let's not have you choosing to make up time later on.' You will need to back this up with a name on the board or a warning about making up time that you are prepared to carry out. It is not so much your tone of voice that has an effect, more the realization that you really will carry out any threats. The longer you let inattention go on without an immediate warning, the more likely the problem is to escalate. If students know that there will be consequences they dislike, they will opt for an easier way out. Some teachers have a plan for students to earn time back by the break: 'You might earn breaktime back if you're sensible for the rest of the lesson.' Alongside this you can remind consistently about 'being cooperative', 'concentrating' and spell out as positively as you can the classroom social skills you want to develop.

Strategies to avoid anger

A teacher's anger rewards bad behaviour, so it should be displayed rarely. Students mirror anger inside even if they seem cowed by it on the outside. The

price you pay for angry confrontation if you win is resentment from the student on the receiving end. If you are angry inside and do not want to show it, look for something elsewhere to praise, shifting the focus of your mind from behaviour that you dislike to behaviour that you can praise. Resist the temptation to play what you think is the role of a very strict and slightly aggressive teacher, or you will shout 'Ross! That's *one* minute off your breaktime!' If you overreact, you will sound out of control yourself rather than in control of the lesson. It is far better to opt for a determined 30-second speech that emphasizes the third person as the acceptable goodie. It is better to say 'In this class we don't behave like that because . . .', 'I need you to . . .' and 'When we're all ready . . .' instead of personally-directed insults. You will achieve nothing by saying 'You little aphid!' or 'Stop behaving like an animal and I won't have to treat you like one, will I?' A difficult child is more likely to mimic an animal in response to being called one. Criticize the action, not the actor. Use the third person 'We', rather than 'You' and spell out clearly the consistent option of 'Work now, or lose time later.'

Anger escalates a difficult situation into an impossible one. If anyone is going to interrupt an angry student, it has to be you. Interrupt with 'I'm talking, you're listening', retaining your gravitas and slow, calm delivery. Despite the stress level involved, keep calm and maintain a positive atmosphere. Your success here is not judged on whether your strategy worked brilliantly but whether you remained outwardly calm (I have used this strategy and usually it has succeeded). If you know the student well and have a good relationship, you could finish by injecting humour to lighten the situation. You could say, for example, 'Fairynuffski, we're done talking about this. Let's get back to work.' Remain positive and you will win through. Become angry and you will lose.

A further strategy for avoiding anger is to tell yourself: 'It's only behaviour and I need to deal with it.' When you first begin teaching, there are dozens of situations that you will find uncomfortable because you are seeing them for the first time as a teacher. A couple of years into the profession you will think differently because you have adjusted to the reality of seeing similar situations develop in your classroom. You will be better at allowing cooling-off time for students and softening your voice.

A stress-busting strategy

Stress often arises from the way that you respond to events. Changing the habits of a student or a class means that you will need to change how you respond to what usually happens.

I've got this stress-buster from the headteacher. Whenever you've got a behaviour problem, such as Adam, who gets out of his seat and will not sit down, or he's cheeky, it is seriously stressful. So later on, you write down 'When Adam gets out of his seat and it winds me up, instead of saying . . . I will . . .' then you write down another response, such

as 'When Adam gets cheeky, I'll say, "We'll discuss your out-of-seat behaviour and bad manners at the end of the lesson." And if that doesn't work, you write another response, such as 'When Adam is cheeky, I'll say, "You'll miss the best activities and have to sit writing by yourself if your manners don't improve." You keep going. But you must put it down on paper. It really works! (Trainee teacher)

The strategy that works is to write:

- Whenever (the student's behaviour) . . .
- Instead of (my current behaviour) . . .
- I will (a different response) . . .

What you are doing through this strategy is changing your behaviour when the student least expects it. You are already prepared for the next 'wind-up'. At the very least, you are preventing yourself from stress by having something else to say or do. The act of writing it down confirms in your mind what you will do. Also, it may serve as a rapid reminder at the start of your lesson. The student's behaviour acts as a trigger to the prepared self-script instead of a trigger to stress.

Respond quickly to changing events

An experienced teacher seems to be able to spot trouble before it starts and avoid it escalating. Experience will lead you to listen for different sounds being made and scan for evidence of off-task behaviour. You can scan the room, dislike what you see and decide how to take action. This may mean that you speak to a student without giving any eye-contact whatsoever. Your intervention is minimal because you appear to be far more absorbed with other things and too busy to deal with minor infringements of behaviour code. You say what you need to happen with the full expectation that it is going to be done.

Eyes in the back of your head

Ruby is off-task and no longer concentrating. You notice this as you scan the room and do not like what you see.

- Turn your back on Ruby and move away.
- Without looking, sharply speak to Ruby and say 'Ruby, I need you to concentrate.'
- Keep your back towards Ruby and wait about 30 seconds.
- Check to see if Ruby is back on task.
- Go over to Ruby and give her some positive feedback when you can.

Reacting quickly to changing events means that you are in tune with what is going on around you, especially responses to the activities that you have set up. There is no need to go looking for trouble, but every need to recognize when students have had enough and need a change of emphasis in their lesson. There is every need to praise good efforts as you scan your classroom. Teachers who react quickly to events actually *prevent* trouble because they move on and involve their students in something else. This is not a matter of darting your head in all directions. Effective scanning is a thorough, more searching browse of the class at frequent intervals to stay in tune with what is going on and pick up what is not. You scan to pick up on the body language, fidgets and excited learners. The remainder is done by listening to comments, noises and chair-shuffling, all of which are signals. Reacting quickly is about anticipating what is needed next in the lesson. Sometimes it is about reacting to demands by saying 'I can't get to you all at once, so don't keep calling out my name.'

I usually know who to watch carefully to prevent trouble. Once you get to know the kids you can actually anticipate problems. Most of the difficult kids are *really* bad at hiding the signals they give off. So you can tell by what they do with equipment or how they sit what mood they're in. Most of my little criminals are rumbled before they even know it. (Year 6 teacher)

Reacting quickly is rather like taking the class pulse. Second-by-second you sense the atmosphere and check that the heart rate has not reached danger point. Most difficult students need a very early signal that you are on their case. A misconception you might have is that reacting quickly means you do things more quickly. You can react quickly and actually appear to take no action at all. Reacting quickly is rapidly registering what is happening around you and taking a decision about what to do next. That decision might be to take immediate strong action, change the direction of the lesson, or signal that there is very little time left to complete work.

Sometimes I'll say 'I hope you won't need a warning because I don't really want that to happen.' In fact I've just given a warning of sorts, but not yet gone down an all-too-familiar route to punishment! (Newly-qualified teacher)

Reducing stress by planning for variety

There is hardly anything worse for a child than to fail at something that the teacher has described as 'fun' and 'easy'. Certainly, you would learn this the hard way if you tried to please students all the time. Variety has nothing to do with being a stage performer in the classroom. Students are there to learn and you cannot deliver from the expectation that everything is interesting and good fun all day. A great deal of what happens in school is hard because it is hard and for no other reason. You can please some of the students for some of the time. Variety is more about judging when to change direction,

when to begin a new task and how many different activities will go on in your lesson.

Good lesson planning is the main component of good behaviour management. A well-planned and motivating lesson can remove the need to manage behaviour and therefore help you to keep your cool. You do not need to plan for students as if they have no attention-span, but you do need to see your lesson from their point of view. If you transmit the idea that nothing students do should ever take more than five minutes, it is likely that they will behave as if this is true. You can always set students a task and build in a few interludes, stopping them, asking questions and returning to the same task with fresh enthusiasm.

I think if a beginner keeps young children on the carpeted area for 45 minutes they are really asking for trouble. However enthusiastic you sound, it's just too long. Twenty minutes will do, and you need to finish by setting tasks and making sure the children understand. They need to know where equipment is and what to do with it. Young children are doers more than listeners, so usually they can't wait to get their hands on something. (Infant teacher)

Think of yourself timing the learning rather than timing the lesson. If your introduction is too short, students will not know what to do and if it is too long, they will forget what has been said. Professional judgement is all about making good decisions about how to balance talking, listening and doing. There are no hard-and-fast rules about this, but long introductions stretch attention-span to the limit. As will be explained in other chapters, there are alternatives to the long introduction. What would happen, for example, if you planned your introduction then halved it? You could come back to the second half later in the lesson, or split your introduction into three phases. One of the most effective science lessons I ever observed was one where students began with an activity that they did not understand. They had to connect a battery, switch and bulb without instructions, then were called to the carpeted area for the introduction to a project about electrical circuits. The teacher had written on the whiteboard: 'Find out how to connect the switch, battery, wires and bulb.' There is always more than one way to do things.

Questions for reflection

- How might you practise a strong signal for getting attention?
- What signals do other teachers use?
- How important is it to plan for variety as well as content?
- What is effective scanning of a class?
- What are the alternatives to waiting patiently for attention?
- What behaviour are you ignoring and therefore tolerating?
- How can you appear more confident when you take centre stage?
- How can you sustain a presence in the classroom when students are working at a task?

Checklist summary

- Avoid the classic irrational belief that students *should never* be bored and your lesson *should* be brilliant.
- The first stage in getting attention is to give a very clear signal that students can hear, or a well-established visual signal.
- Teachers who react quickly to events actually prevent trouble because they move on and involve their students.
- When you have gained attention there is a vacuum waiting to be filled. Fill it, and move on or your class will switch to their own agenda.
- Effective scanning is a thorough, more searching browse of the class at frequent intervals to stay in tune with what is going on, and pick up what is not.
- Reacting quickly is rapidly registering what is happening around you and taking a decision about what to do next.
- Never underestimate the power of a pause, but be very careful to keep up a lively pace after pausing, or you will lose your momentum.
- If you ignore misbehaviour that is likely to escalate, you only signal that you tolerate it.
- Think of yourself timing the learning, rather than timing the lesson.
- Learn to persist until you have students' attention.
- Plan for learning, not just to interest and please students.
- Give plenty of feedback about work and effort.