

Teaching Challenging Students – How being able to be really specific about the behaviour can led us to more positive solutions

‘He just doesn’t listen’. ‘She never pays attention’. These are comments I hear often from teachers who are despairing about the behaviour and attitude of some of the students in their class. In my work as a teacher trainer and Educational Psychotherapist, I work with the students who are considered at risk of exclusion due to challenging behaviour as well as the staff who are trying to teach them. I have found Robert Dilts’ work on Logical Levels to be a useful framework for thinking about and dealing with these students. In this article, I would like to describe how being specific on the logical level of BEHAVIOUR can give us a language and way in with these students.

Getting specific about the Behaviour

At the start of a staff workshop on dealing with challenging students, I start by asking the participants to describe a student whom they have found difficult to deal with. (They can usually do this very easily and with great emotion. These students tend to stay in our minds long after the class!)

I then ask them to work with a partner and divide their comments into two lists – those which purely describe the behaviour of the student and those which attribute a judgement or interpretation of the behaviour. Inevitably, the majority of comments focus on an interpretation of the behaviour as when we find ourselves in conflict we often mind-read the intentions of others. We use our own filters and values to attach meaning and labels to behaviour. This can lead us to miss important information and make it difficult to gain any rapport with these students. Our ‘map of the world’ is not theirs.

For example, descriptions often offered by the group include :

He’s not interested

She doesn’t listen

He never pays attention

She’s always trying to disrupt the lesson

He isn’t at all motivated

She’s lazy

Participants often think they have described the behaviour of the students but if we look at the language and think more about these statements, they are not descriptions of behaviour. These are actually comments on an IDENTITY level. It is very difficult for a person to change their sense of self. This type of comment often provokes a very negative, confrontational attitude in a student. ‘If you think that’s what I am, that’s what I will be’ or ‘Of course I’m listening, prove I’m not’.

Separating Behaviour from Identity

In order to understand the distinction between IDENTITY and BEHAVIOUR level statements, I ask participants to look at the following ways a student who is having a problem with spelling might describe the problem :

I’m a bad speller

IDENTITY

I think I’m no good at spelling

BELIEF

I can’t spell

CAPABILITY

I spell badly

BEHAVIOUR

I spell words badly when under pressure

ENVIRONMENT

For the teacher trying to help the student improve their spelling, the statements which are easier to work with appear towards the bottom of the list. 'I spell badly' is a BEHAVIOUR and suggests I can learn to change it, to learn how to spell better. 'I spell badly when under pressure' is even more precise and related to the level of ENVIRONMENT ; it gives more information about the behaviour – the ' where and when. '

Relating this to challenging behaviour in class, if we are specific in our description of the behaviour and separate it from our judgement of it, we will be able to discuss the situation more easily with students. If I know what these students do specifically to make the teacher think they are not listening, not paying attention, I can think about what needs to happen instead and what the student needs to learn or practice. I can discuss this with the student and explain why, for example, a particular behaviour leads me to think they are not listening.

Finding a Positive Intention in the Behaviour

A student who is looking out the window might not be listening or might be thinking deeply about what the teacher just said. How can I know unless I can check it out with the student? I ask teachers, therefore, to state the problem behaviour more specifically, describe what it means to them and think of a possible positive intention to it. This is not easy to do with students with whom we are having conflict. For example, teachers sometimes say begrudgingly about a student who is calling out 'I suppose they just want attention'. This in itself is not believed by most teachers to be a positive reason. I would suggest that maybe the student thinks the teacher is the most important person in the room and wants to show them they are interested. If I choose to think this , I could say something like : 'I think its great that you want to show me you are interested and my opinion is important to you and we need to find a way to give everyone a chance to answer. When you keep calling out without putting your hand up, it stops this happening'.

Linking back to Identity and Belief

Of course, it is not always so simple. Often we behave in certain ways as a result of unconscious beliefs and patterns which make up our sense of self. However, by discussing the issue on a very specific behavioural level, with a decision to see a positive intention in the behaviour, we can gain more rapport with the students and perhaps uncover with them the real underlying causes of the conflict. The behaviour may well be linked to a belief or identity level but it is very difficult to tackle it by beginning at these levels. We need to be able to gather more information and I have found this way of looking at behaviour helps us do this.