

Starting with a Pause:

How Restorative Communication Transforms Schools



By Annie O'Shaughnessy
True Nature Teaching

How can we hold students accountable and help them recover from harm in ways that do not damage but instead enhance their connectedness? Restoring good relations in meaningful ways is the key, and it is what restorative measures are designed to do.

~ Circle in the Square, Riestenberg

It's the first day of school and John enters my high school English classroom late, sits down in the back and says, "English f'ing sucks" at no one in particular. His words hang heavily in the air as the rest of the students look at me, waiting for my reaction.

I invite you to pause to reflect on how you might respond in this moment. Would you say: "Using those words in school is inappropriate and will not be tolerated. This is your first warning."? Do you respond with humor and sarcasm, "That's a fine way to start class!?" Or do you simply ignore his words and get the class started? What would a response sound like that not only holds the student accountable but also deepens relationship and personal growth for both parties? I asked myself this question countless times over the 25 years since I first became a teacher. Studying mindfulness, trauma-informed care, and restorative practices helped me to finally articulate an answer worth sharing.



What is Restorative Communication?

If you Googled “restorative communication (RC)” right now you would *not* find one agreed upon definition. But if you read a dozen of the related articles or books you would find a common focus on the power of: creating a compassionate, relational space for all voices to be heard, exploring the unmet needs at the core of the conflict, and using an inquiry-based protocol for repairing the harm and moving forward. Specifically, current restorative approach literature references “affective statements”—the practice of taking responsibility for one’s own feelings instead of projecting or blaming—as the core element of this approach. In addition, principles and practices from Marshall B. Rosenberg’s approach called “Nonviolent Communication” are often incorporated in RC training. Finally, RC asks us to avoid deficit thinking and language that identifies a person as the “problem” and instead refer to the *incident* or *behavior* as the problem. So instead of thinking “How do we deal with the bully?” We ask, “What needs to happen to prevent John from feeling the need to bully others?” In this way, RC is not only a way we speak *to* kids, but also a way we speak *about* kids and to each other.

With this approach, everyone, including John, can learn how to have a conversation that leads to engagement, peaceful resolution, learning, and repair, instead of escalation, disengagement, and/or exclusion. And in the field of restorative practices in schools, that is the goal—to create the conditions for students to engage and remain engaged in learning. As teachers, we often

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hold onto the hope that if we just come up with a more exciting lesson plan or read more classroom management books we will succeed in this goal. The truth is much more complex and gets more so every day as anxiety, depression, trauma, and other behavioral challenges increase in schools everywhere.

Outside of what I’ve learned from others about this approach is the first-hand experience I’ve had with students. What I know for sure is that two factors influence the success or failure of RC more than any script you come up with. First are the eyes with which you see the student. Biases, assumptions, beliefs, and ignorance all cloud how we see a student. Before we can have a successful restorative conversation we need to drop what we think we know and work to learn what we don’t know. It is, therefore, the responsibility of every educator to become trauma-informed and culturally competent. Second, students respond more to the quality of our presence than to the perfection of our words. Our habits of communication are

Continues on page 4

Continued from page 3

deeply conditioned and informed by our implicit biases, belief systems, unconscious “knee-jerk” reactions, conscious judgments and prejudice, and capacity or lack thereof to be focused and fully present. In addition, our capacity to think clearly and respond instead of react is directly related to our ability to stay grounded and regulated in the midst of conflict and stress. We can learn a script, the right words to say, but until we bring to light that which undermines our ability to be nonjudgmentally present, they are just words.

Bringing mindful awareness to the habits and beliefs that inform our communication is essential to our work as restorative teachers—as humans. Some questions for self-reflection around your communication style with challenging students:

1. Do you believe you need to have the answers and position yourself as *the* authority?
2. Do you think you know the student’s situation or experience?
3. Do you ask questions first or do you run with your assumptions?
4. Do you stop to consider, or inquire into, what role you or your lesson plan might have in the disruption?
5. Are you able to see the student’s behavior as simply a disruptive attempt at getting their needs met?
6. Do you have a strong desire to work with the student towards a solution rather than a desire to punish him, her, or them? Or make an example of her, him, or them?
7. Do you consider disruptive behavior a lack of skill or a lack of will?

The Importance of Creating Connection and Accountability

As I look back on my life as a young teacher I can easily recall other situations like the one with John. My go-to response for years was to avoid conflict by deflecting with humor or ignoring and redirecting attention with my particular brand of goofy charisma. With these techniques I was well liked and rarely, if ever, had conflict with students. Sounds pretty great right? Not really. While I could talk any student down from being escalated and made allies out of the toughest kids, these same kids continued to cause havoc outside of my class. So while it served me to avoid conflict it did not necessarily serve my kids, colleagues, or the school. They were not held accountable, and not holding students accountable, I have learned, is a powerful way of saying, “What you do doesn’t matter.” Sadly, I knew even less about how to serve the disengaged students who did the bare minimum to get by. I used my formidable enthusiasm to cajole them into learning, but often they slid back down into apathy, and because they didn’t cause “trouble” I often left them there because I didn’t know what else to do.



The crucial learning that transformed my communication approach came from examining how the restorative approach defines “holding students accountable.” RC uses a relational approach and inquiry to examine the unmet needs that are at the root of the harm (whether done to others or to themselves), explore harm that has been done, and work collaboratively to restore the situation and relationship. Through this process, multiple stories emerge that reveal the complexity inherent in every human interaction and activates empathy. In this way, RC builds relationship and accountability concurrently. Therefore, if I were to cause harm, being “accountable” would not be about identifying which rule I broke and what punishment I should endure, but about being “counted” as a valuable person

in a community who has impact on others, who matters, and who is seen as capable and caring enough to repair the harm and move forward. When we *really* get this, responding by ignoring or punishing is no longer an option.

Restorative Communication v. 2.0

Building upon the strengths of NVC and Affective Language and considering the school context, a stronger model for RC is built upon these basic tenants:

- Connection and relationship provide the “ballast” that prevents “flipping over” during challenging (shaming) conversations and situations. Shame is like the wind that tips a sailboat. We can handle it when we feel love and belonging, but when we don’t, shame can “flip us over” and activate behaviors like blaming others or ourselves, withdrawing, or avoiding.¹
- Providing equal opportunity for voice improves everyone’s ability to listen, feel connected, and feel that they matter.
- Providing a grounded presence that communicates re-spect² promotes productive dialogue and provides co-regulation.

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1. “4.5. Compass of Shame | Defining Restorative | What We Do.” <https://www.iirp.edu/defining-restorative/compass-of-shame>. Accessed 24 Oct. 2018.

2. I use the hyphen to signify a specific meaning of respect based on it’s etymology, “to look back on, or to look again.” Re-spect then is a verb that says, I will drop my assumptions and biases and look again to see our shared humanity.

Continues on page 6

Continued from page 5

- In addition, students respond more positively to adults in authority when the adults humanize themselves through authentic and skillful self-disclosure.³
- Mindful awareness is essential when working with our own intense emotions and implicit bias during challenges with students.
- People are happier, more productive, and more likely to admit to and repair harm when we do things *with* them versus *to* them or *for* them.
- Everyone has something important to contribute to the solution. (We don't need to have all the answers ourselves.)
- Reminding students and all members of the school community of their innate goodness, with specific examples, is the first step in developing intrinsic motivation to repair harm.
- We are all interconnected. What we do or say matters.

Clearly it would be overwhelming to consider all these tenants and reflect deeply every time we communicate with a student. But we can develop a practice of communication that slowly, over time, overrides old habits and attitudes that derail problem solving, growth, engagement, and learning. We won't ever be perfect. To say, "I'm very sorry. I totally just called you out in front

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of everyone on something I knew nothing about—let's start over," is gold. When you do this, students become your ally. We want to be authentic in our desire for productive dialogue, because students will respond to that desire, no matter how awkward.

A Framework for Practice—P.A.I.R

I developed the following approach over the many years of practicing mindfulness, training in trauma-informed teaching, and working day-in and day-out with resistant and challenging youth.

P = Pause – As you approach the behavior, pause and become aware of your breath and your feet on the ground. In this pause:

- Bring **awareness** to your own experience and the surroundings. "Am I too escalated to be effective?" "Am I in danger?" Take a few breaths.

3. "Center for Adolescent Studies." <https://centerforadolescentstudies.com/>. Accessed 24 Oct. 2018.



- Check your **understanding** of what is observably true versus what you are assuming. In other words, drop what you think you know and get curious. Scripts don't work if we are seeing the student through a fog of our own biases and assumptions.
- Notice your **intention**. What outcome are you seeking? i.e. Are you looking for solutions or just wanting to be right?⁴

A = Acknowledge – Validate their experience as much as possible and acknowledge what factors and issues might be influencing the situation. Begin interaction with:

- Acknowledging them personally and what you notice, what is observable and true. "Hey John, I am noticing..." "Good morning kids, it seems..." "Good to see you Mary, I see that..." (Remember, a student's behavior can be unacceptable AND you can still communicate with care and respect.)
- Acknowledge your own feelings, if appropriate, using affective statements. "I'm not feeling great about seeing you in the hall after class has started." Or, "It feels hard to give instructions when there are several conversations going on."
- Acknowledge compassionately what you imagine or know to be true. "It's gotta be hard to get to class on time

every day." Or, "Getting into the swing of school can be hard," or "You are usually on time to class." Even if you aren't right, students respond positively to your attempts to empathize.

I = Inquire – Ask restorative questions, and variations to them, in order to:

- learn more about the root cause of the behavior,
- check your understanding of what they've said,
- intentionally dismantle your assumptions and biases,
- explore harm or impact.

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4. Barron, M.J. and Grimm, J.W. (2006). *The Integrative and Compensatory Model of Change*. South Burlington, VT: Centerpoint.

Continues on page 32

Continued from page 7

From the International Institute for Restorative Practices⁵

(with my less formal versions in italics).

- What happened? *“What’s happening for you today?” “I’d like to hear your take on what happened.”*
- What were you thinking of at the time? *“Is there something you were hoping would happen?” “I’d love to know what’s going on for you and what you were thinking when this happened.”*
- What are you thinking about since or now? *“Seems like you have a lot on your mind. What have you been thinking about related to this incident?”*
- Who has been affected by what you have done? *“Have you noticed some ways your behavior has affected my teaching? Other kids learning? In what ways have they been affected?”*

5. “Time to Think: Using Restorative Questions | News from IIRP.” 9 Jan. 2012, <https://www.iirp.edu/news-from-iirp/time-to-think-using-restorative-questions>. Accessed 2 Dec. 2018.

Remember—if students are escalated, they won’t have access to their “thinking brain.” Begin attending to your student’s and your own regulation by regulating yourself through controlled breathing, asking the student to take a short walk or drink of water, and prompting them to use the self-regulation tool you learned in class together. Whatever the situation is, try to be specific. Instead of “What’s happening?” or “What do you need?” ask, “Is there anything going on today for you that’s making it hard to get to class?” or “Let’s take some relaxing breaths together.”

R = Restore/Repair – Collaborate with students to come up with ways to restore themselves to the class, in relationship with you, or simply to self-regulate. Focus on maintaining their dignity and maintaining warm regard.

- What do you think you need to do to make things right? *“So what are some things we can do to move forward so I can do my job and your classmates can learn?” “How can I help you to focus more in class?”*



Empower them to restore themselves *with* you as an ally. Often students simply need help finding solutions. “Is there anything I can do, or the school can do, to help you get to class on time?” or “Is there a way to resolve or put aside the issue playing out on your phone so you can rejoin class?”

Conclusion

P.A.I.R is not meant to be followed lock step. It is a guide to remind you of the essential pieces of the process. Often, when disruption occurred during a lesson, I could only do the pause and acknowledge in the moment and had to follow up after class with the inquiry and repair. What is equally important to this P.A.I.R approach is building the community and culture that allows for mistakes, is unconditionally willing to look for our shared humanity, and is resilient in the face of challenging interactions. To me, the four pillars of this culture are: respect, safety, belonging, and equal voice. The more we work to build these qualities in our classrooms and schools, the less it matters whether we get P.A.I.R right.

- **Respect:** Do I routinely drop my assumptions about students and invite in different views? Do I build these opportunities into our curriculum and classroom routines? Do I let others know that I have faith in our shared humanity? Strengthen your skills with training in Equity (www.tolerance.org),

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Cultural Competence, Gender Identity, Mindfulness (www.mindfulschools.org).

- **Belonging:** Have I recognized for myself and shown students that they have a place in the community—that their presence matters (in how I speak, teach, assess, etc.)? Strengthen your skills with relational play (www.howardmoody.com) and circle training (www.truena-tureteaching.com).
- **Voice:** Have I given the students equal opportunities to speak? Do I listen with open, nonjudgmental presence? Do I offer multiple ways of “speaking”? Strengthen your skills with student

Continues on page 34

Continued from page 33

engagement by using Up for Learning's resources (www.upforlearning.org).

- **Safety:** Am I doing what I need to do to stay grounded and regulated? Is my body language threatening? Do I attend to what constitutes a trauma-sensitive classroom/school? Strengthen your skills with the book, *Fostering Resilient Learners: Strategies for Creating a Trauma-Sensitive Classroom* (www.ascd.org/publications/books/overview/fostering-resilient-learners.aspx) by Kristen Souers and Pete Hall.

While developing RC skills may be daunting, it is worth your efforts many times over. With this approach you are able to say goodbye to power struggles and the growing stress of cajoling kids to engage or being at "war" with kids over behaviors. You become allies. It will require time, humility, and self-awareness.

So how did I respond to John? As you read, listen for P.A.I.R and the principles in action.

I pause and inhale deeply. On the exhale I feel my feet on the ground and consciously let go of the negative assumptions I am forming about John. I say, without sarcasm, "Wow. You must have had a rough time in English if those are the first words out of your mouth on the first day! On behalf of all English teachers, I am sorry for whatever has made you so unhappy with English." John, I will learn later, is not quick to soften or smile or even respond.

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So I continue, "In all seriousness. I'm committed to making this English class not 'suck' for you. But I am going to need two things from you: I need your willingness to work together on this challenge, AND I will need you to change the way you enter class. Your opinion matters to me, but having a student say 'English f'ing sucks' as they enter class really takes the wind out of my sails and makes it hard to do my best. Do you think you can do those two things and would you be willing to meet later so I can hear more about why English isn't your favorite subject and what we can do about that?" John nodded his head with a grunt.

John would continue to groan about English, but he did follow through on his side of the bargain. Together we found ways to make English class less painful and he never did enter class like that again. Instead he slowly became my advocate when stu-



dents became disruptive, earned his first “B” in English, and eventually let me know that I was the best teacher he had ever had. In June he revealed this, “I left my last school because I threw a desk. I did not know how to deal with my anger. Thank you for helping me with that and thank you for being fair and caring so much.”

Today, as a consultant, I reflect back on that relationship often. What did I do right? How did this student come to feel like I cared so much when I didn’t feel like I went out of my way for my students like some teachers did? My conclusion: the mindfulness and restorative practices I used in my classroom. ●

Annie O’Shaughnessy is an educator and primary consultant for True Nature Teaching, serving schools and teams looking to operate in a more holistically restorative way. Through implementation consultation, higher ed instruction, educator training, writing, and keynote speaking, Annie supports schools in developing vital and inclusive learning communities where students and educators grow and thrive. An avid hiker and obsessively curious human being, Annie can be reached at annie@truenatureteaching.com



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