

Teaching Boys

Andrew Fuller

Boy smarts

Boys are the masters of minimalism and the practitioners of “just –in-time “ management. Asked to do almost any task, their immediate response is “later”. If they are asked to write a 50-word essay, they will count the words and if they write 51 words most of them will think they have overdone it.

If you have predominantly boys in your class there are a number of things that you can do to improve behaviour and learning. These methods are likely to work with the majority of boys.

Respect

Boys are constantly checking to see if you respect them. They respond well to people who have expectations of them and respect them as capable of meeting those goals. As the TV character Ali G. would say “respect!” If a boy has a sense that you respect him, he will walk over coals for you.

Never ask a boy who is a poor reader to read out loud in front of his peers. He will be humiliated and will never do anything for you ever again.

Have clear signals about who is in charge

Boys need boundaries. They need to know who is in charge here. They respond to teachers who are fair, funny and respect their points of view and they generally do better with teacher led learning. Open spaced learning areas where no one clearly owns the space can be quite anxiety provoking for boys and that anxiety converts into expressions of low motivation and clowning type behaviours.

Use a physical signal when you want silence

Boys need more signals than girls partly because they are less tuned into facial cues. Boys are more able to screen out white noise.

(Teachers requesting quiet equals white noise!) Therefore, deliver instructions in silence. Use visual cues, raising hand, turning lights off and on, and moving to a particular part of the room. Never, ever yell.

Fewer rules and fewer words is better

Have a couple (no more than three) clear rules that you apply fairly and consistently. Base your classroom management on the idea of, “I won’t let this happen to you and I won’t let you do it to anyone else”.

When you make an instruction use a back up visual that you can point to for boys who have difficulty listening.

Value them and they will be heroes

Boys are tuned into hierarchies. This means the predominant values of a classroom, family or school will play a powerful role in determining their actions. Have a couple of core values (e.g. compassion, generosity, being part of a team). Live by them and insist upon them.

Help boys to learn that they can be heroes and victorious but that winning doesn’t mean someone else has to lose.

Use knowledge from computer games as an inspiration for learning

Boys’ attraction to competition will override almost any disadvantage or loss of motivation. They generally love competitive games especially when there is not an ultimate winner. Quick fire quizzes with several rounds are a successful way of engaging boys.

Computer game designers have cleverly used the principles of engagement to captivate boys:

- * Make success challenging but attainable by breaking it down into stages.
- * Make success more likely than failure, The most motivating games have players succeed

about 80% of the time initially before building up to 100% before moving to the next level

- * Give people the opportunity to try again.
- * Try to create a sense of moratorium where boys and girls can try to out new activities in a setting where there are no consequences.
- * Use lots of movement

Pay attention to less competitive, sensitive boys. Assisting them to attain personal bests can be useful.

Give boys more time to answer and to assemble the words and give them a chance to phone a friend (the friend cannot answer the question but can make helpful suggestions).

Move regularly.

Teaching boys is like being a cross between a matador and a traffic cop. Keep on the move and mingle with the crowd.

Boys see things best in motion. Use visuals and animations as often as you can. As James (2009) notes boys love targeting. If you have ever watched boys place rubbish into bins you will see that they don't place it, they take a shot. For this reason movement and aiming to achieve a set target are powerful strategies with boys.

Control where they sit

Move boys who do not appear to be paying attention to the front. Proactively shift the seating of boys who seem unsettled or distracted. They will often be playing up to impress their local audience.

Boys need quiet times

In order to reflect and re-energise boys need quiet times to think, read and at times quietly chat with others. Arrange schools so that there are quiet spots for thinking.

Know about anger

Anger and shame can stop boys learning and once boys are angry, it is harder for them to get over it. If they feel you are going to shame them in front of their peers they will fight you tooth and nail. Most boys will do silly, self-

defeating things rather than lose the respect of their peers.

Take your sail out of their winds. Deal with issues at a time of your choosing not when the boy wants to deal with it. If you really have to pick a battle with a boy, see him after class (for your own protection, always keep doors open for boys and girls when you see them in private).

There are also decision-making differences between girls and boys when involved in dispute resolution. Girls are often more able to see the effect of their actions on other students so asking "how do you think she felt?" type questions may pay off. In contrast boys may be less cued into other students' emotions and a more successful strategy may be reinforce a rule such as, "I wouldn't let him do that to you and I'm not going to let you do it to him".

Boys are loyal and funny

Boys love the inside word, the cheat sheet and they love to score. Giving them hints suggestions and a way to succeed builds their loyalty to you. Boys buy popularity through achievement, jokes and skills. Humour is an essential quality. Make it smart to be smart.

Boys generally learn through doing-thinking- talking

Boys like movement and are generally more active than girls. They are also more concerned with performance. While some boys will be inherently interested in the material, almost all boys engage when there is a competitive spirit. The more that you mimic a game show format the more boys will be engaged.

Give them a whiff of success

Most men and boys waste an incredible amount of time completing tasks that don't need to be done and avoiding tasks that don't need to be avoided.

Help them to structure tasks and to improve on early attempts so that they gain mastery and success. Once a boy believes he can be successful, he'll almost always live up to it.

Extracted from the Brain Based Learning Manual, available at www.andrewfuller.com.au