

Oppositional Students or Oppositional Teachers

Managing Resistance

by John W. Maag

Resistance

Freddy enters Ms. Hogarth's classroom after recess with a look indicating he's angry and is going to blow. Realizing the importance of antecedent control in managing behavior, Ms. Hogarth sends Freddy on an errand to the office in order to give him time to settle down while the other students get out their books for reading period. Alas, although an admirable strategy, Freddy returns with that same look. He stomps over to the book shelf, grabs his book and walks half way to his desk before throwing the book across the room. He glares at Ms. Hogarth challengingly. She asks Freddy to pick up the book. He replies, "No I won't and you can't make me--nobody can make me!"

At this point Freddy could be considered "oppositional", and Ms. Hogarth must deal with his resistance. She cannot back down because her authority has been challenged. In order to maintain discipline and the respect of the other students, Ms. Hogarth must make Freddy pick up the book or suffer the consequences. Being a proud behavior analyst, *she initiates a sequence of consequences, these increase in severity

based on choices presented to Freddy and his responses. This approach could go something like this: "Freddy, if you don't pick up the book in one minute you'll lose your reading points for the day-- the decision is yours." After a one minute standoff, Freddy is told that he now has lost his points and the opportunity to pick up the book and needs to go to the time out area. Freddy refuses. Ms. Hogarth then tells him that he has lost the opportunity to go to the time out area and will be escorted to the principal's

Eventually Freddy is removed from the room. Respect for authority has been maintained, and Ms. Hogarth later laments how oppositional Freddy can be. But who is really being oppositional-- Freddy or Ms. Hogarth? I believe Freddy is behaving in a very rational and purposeful way, given the set of circumstances described above. Rather, Ms. Hogarth is being oppositional because she is stuck using stereotypic and unimaginative patterns of responding, and consequently is unable to communicate effectively with Freddy (Maag, 1988). What Ms. Hogarth desired, having Freddy pick up the book, did not occur largely because of her ineffective

patterns of communication. Yet she most likely will continue to use this approach to discipline even when it does not result in the desired outcome.

Overcoming Limitations

In many respects, we often are a stubborn and inflexible species. When a solution is not working, for instance, most of us do it more frequently (Cormier & Cormier, 1985). Fisch, Weakland, and Segal (1982) suggested that by limiting our options to certain ways of behaving, even when they do not work, ordinary life difficulties become more severe because the initial problem was mishandled and remains unresolved. These patterns often result in the application of linear interventions (Watzlawick, Weakland, & Fisch, 1974). For example, if a student stays after school for misbehaving, the problem is presumed to have been addressed by the punishment. But what if the student misbehaves again? The linear solution would be to keep the student after school for an entire week. These types of solutions are called "more of the same" and seldom work. And here is where the crux of the matter lies. We need to abandon our preconceived notions about what we "should" do or say

to a youngster and expand our perspective to consider alternative options.

We generally have more knowledge of how to deal effectively with youngsters than we let ourselves know. In fact, it is amazing what could be done if we perceived all our available options. Unfortunately, we often follow a very careful routine without realizing we are restricting our behavior. We tend to place limits on so many things; and in turn are limited in our patterns of understanding and action. Every magician, for example, will tell you not to let children too near or they will see through the trick. Adults have closed minds. We think we are watching everything--but we are not watching because we have a routine way of looking.

In order to effectively manage resistance it is important to be comprehensive and unrestrictive in our thinking and not apply the third line, fourth page of any

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classroom management book to any student--think comprehensively! So often we only perceive a limited number of options for dealing with resistance. These options often are based on our scheme for "131) classroom interventions." Even experienced teachers seem to be on a perpetual search for "the" intervention. We want interventions that are practical, quick, easy to use, and produce results with all types of students. In fact, we already possess a multitude of potential interventions. The difficulty is in getting ourselves to perceive different options. When speaking to a group of teachers I often illustrate this point by having every other person make a fist. The person next to them must get that fist open as quickly as possible. Invariably, most people try to force the other person's fist open. I then inquire how many people simply "asked" the person to open their fist. After the laughter and

sighing subsides, I point out how "asking" is well within ' our repertoires, yet we often do not perceive even this, simple option.

Milton Erickson was asked to consult with various professionals concerning a catatonic schizophrenic who was not responding to conventional psychotherapeutic interventions (Rossi, Ryan, & Sharp, 1983). Dr. Erickson walked into the room where the patient was sitting in a catatonic state. Several psychiatrists were standing over the patient discussing various conventional psychiatric treatment approaches such as the use of psychotropic medication, electroconvulsive therapy, and psychoanalysis. These psychiatrists asked Dr. Erickson for his recommendation. Without hesitation Dr. Erickson walked up to the patient and stomped on his feet several times. The patient came right out of his catatonic state. The point to be made here is not that foot stomping is "the" intervention for working with behaviorally disordered individuals, but rather that many potential interventions are available if we would only expand our perceptions to encompass other areas of our experiences. To this end, it is helpful to understand conceptualizations: of resistance.

Understanding Resistance

Resistance originally was described by Freud (1900-1952) in the context of psychoanalysis. He viewed resistance as a defensive reaction that served to protect the individual against awareness of anxiety caused by unresolved psychic conflicts or unacceptable thoughts and impulses. Freud speculated that, in spite of an expressed request for help, individuals were resistant to giving up their symptoms because the symptoms were used to maintain internal equilibrium and avoid

Although psychoanalytic theory has been criticized as offering few practical techniques for use in the classroom, Freud did contribute to our knowledge of resistance through the notion of countertransference. It is not uncommon to develop negative reactions to opposi-

tional students. When these reactions assume overriding control of the situation countertransference can develop. In psychoanalytic terms countertransference refers to situations in which the student's behavior invokes in the teacher conflicts related to unresolved situations in the teacher's life, causing the teacher to respond to the student in an unobjective way (Peterson & Nisenholz, 1987). Countertransference can result in teachers behaving in rejecting and hostile ways towards students (Watkins, 1985). It is very important, therefore, that we be aware of our own values and feelings so that our behavior toward students will not have a negative impact. It is important to recognize that, unless intentionally controlled for, behavior and communications are just as much a function of our personal beliefs and, useful or not, will place certain constraints on the nature of our interaction with students (Gordon & Meyers-Anderson, 1981).

A similar view of resistance, although without the psychoanalytic undertones, is presented in the family systems literature. From this perspective, resistance results from a need to keep a system homeostatic, or stable (Jackson, 1968). Efforts to change are resisted because such change implies too much deviation from "the way things are" (Cormier & Cormier, 1985). Again, resistance is seen as a way to maintain equilibrium and avoid conflict. Individuals tend to cling to the way things are and respond ambivalently to the threat of losing control that often accompanies change. Gottman and Lieblum (1974) view individuals as behaving as if they wanted only more of what they already have, even if what they have is ineffective.

Behavioral perspectives generally minimize the role of resistance. Individuals are seen to behave in certain ways only as long as these behaviors are maintained by controlling consequences. Change will occur given the proper set of contingencies. Lack of change is attributed to failure to identify antecedents and consequences. This hard-line behavioral view was challenged by Hersen (1971) who acknowledged the presence of resistance in behavior therapy and asserted that it cannot always

be explained away on the basis of operant conditioning. Most behavioral techniques are aimed at avoiding resistance by increasing compliance and include such things as using relevant and appropriate tasks, giving students choices, presenting tasks in a form acceptable to the student, keeping tasks small, concrete, and simple, and actively involving the student in devising the tasks (Anderson & Stewart, 1983).

What then is resistance? Resistance can be conceptualized simply as any behavior that interferes with or reduces the likelihood of a successful outcome (Cormier & Cormier, 1985). This definition has some advantages over those following a particular theoretical orientation. For example, it could be teacher, administrator, psychologist, or parent behavior that interferes with a successful outcome; and not just student behavior. In fact, resistance can stem from a variety of sources including student variables, teacher variables, and environmental variables (Gottman & Leiblum, 1974). However, I take a much more radical stance by telling teachers that resistance in classroom context originates solely from their behavior. This assertion usually is met with much "resistance", thereby proving my point. If this subtlety escapes them, I follow up by stating that if they never asked students to do anything, then there would be no resistance! The point to be made here is that resistance results from the way we respond to students and therefore can be managed by adopting new patterns of behavior.

Adopting New Patterns of Behavior

In order to help students adopt new, more functional patterns of behavior, it is important to recognize that we are not -competent to teach students all the things they need to know. Students can learn a lot on their own if only we can serve as a catalyst. As in most cases, the power to change resides in the individual (Watzlawick et al., 1974). The teacher's task is to establish an atmosphere wherein change can occur. While working as a counselor I encountered many clients who wanted to quit smoking. Most individuals who want to quit

smoking usually have done so upon several past occasions. These individuals already possess the knowledge to change. Therefore, the focus of interventions is to set up a situation that frees the individual to perceive all the options they already possess to maintain a smoke-free lifestyle. So too do teachers possess many skills for managing student resistance. The key is to perceive different options for responding to students.

Join the Student: Accept or Encourage Resistance

Too often intentionally or unintentionally we attempt to inculcate our students with a way of looking at and dealing with the world that has worked well for us and others but which is, perhaps, clumsy and inappropriate with respect to the student's experience of the world. We expect students to accept our authority. Trying to lecture or otherwise force a student to comply with our version of the world results in resistance. If we are to deal effectively with resistance, we must learn to join the student in their frame of reference. There are no two people alike, no two people who understand the same sentence the same way, and so in dealing with students we must try not to fit them to our concept of what they should be. We should try to discover what their concept of themselves happens to be. Therefore, it is important to use naturally occurring events of the student's world.

A story Milton Erickson (Rosen, 1982) often told was of his daughter who came home from grade school one day and said, "Daddy, all the girls in school bite their nails and I want to be in style too." He replied, "you certainly ought to be in style and you have a lot of catching up to do. Now the best way to catch up is to bite your nails for 15 minutes three times a day, every day." His daughter began enthusiastically at first. Then she began quitting early and one day she said, "Daddy, I'm going to start a new style at school--long nails." By joining his daughter in her desire to be in style, Dr. Erickson proceeded to make the "stylish behavior" into an ordeal (Haley, 1984). It became more of a bother to keep the behavior than to give it up.

At the beginning of this article I presented the scenario of Freddy--a boy who threw a book across the classroom. This situation actually happened to me while I was teaching at a psychiatric hospital. I could have responded in a way similar to the one described earlier--in essence trying to get Freddy to accept my reality. Instead I entered Freddy's world and used his perspective of reality to induce a change in his behavior. After the student responded to my request to pick up the book by saying "No, I won't and you can't make me--nobody can make me.", I realized this student's frame of reference was to be oppositional. Therefore, I responded by saying, "You're right, I can't make you pick up that book. I can't even make you move that book one inch. And I know you CAN'T move that book one foot ... you certainly can't move that book onto your desk. AND I know there's no way you can put that book back on the shelf?" I effectively entered the student's world view of being oppositional. In order for the student to continue to defy me, he had to comply. I

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was able to elicit the desired response from the student by joining and using his view of being oppositional.

By encouraging or accepting resistance you are putting the student in a position where his or her attempts to resist are defined as cooperative behavior. The student finds himself or herself following your directives no matter what he or she does, because what he or she does is defined as cooperation. Once the student is cooperating, he or she can be diverted into new behaviors. This approach is analogous to trying to change the course of a river. If you oppose the river by trying to block it, the river will merely go over and around. But if you accept the force of the river and divert it in a new direction, the force of the river will cut a new channel.

Breaking the Pattern: Provide a Worse Alternative

Often the problem is how to get students to follow directives while simultaneously achieving autonomy in making decisions. It is possible to solve this problem by leading a student in one direction in such a way that he or she is provoked to go in another direction. When a student is being resistant it is important to break his or her pattern of responding. One of the best ways to enable a student to break a maladaptive pattern is to tell him or her to do what he or she is already doing, and then you inject some difference (Haley, 1984).

Milton Erickson worked with a lady who weighed 180 pounds, but wanted to weigh 130 pounds (Rosen, 1982). In the past when this lady would reach 130 pounds she would rush to the kitchen to celebrate her success--promptly gaining back the 50 pounds, Dr. Erickson told her to gain an additional 50 pounds and when she reached an even 200 pounds she then could begin to reduce. The lady became so distressed at having to gain additional weight before she could reduce that when she finally was able to begin dieting, she never gained the weight back. The lady's pattern had been to reduce and gain. Dr. Erickson reversed the pattern by making her gain and reduce.

This story illustrates how it is often possible to get students to change their pattern of responding by making a small change in their behavior. The woman who gained weight had apparently learned to tolerate gaining weight only up to 180 pounds. If you can succeed in making a student's tolerance level intolerable, the student will change their own behavior. This directive is paradoxical in nature--that is, it seems to defy logic. In these interventions, the student is encouraged to either produce the maladaptive behavior at will or to avoid trying to behave appropriately (Simon & Vetter-Zemitzsch, 1985). The paradox conveys to students that they can change

by remaining unchanged. The idea behind working paradoxically is to never fight with students. When you accept a student's resistance, the student is caught in a position where resistance becomes cooperation (Shelton & Levey, 1981).

Manipulate the Student

The use of manipulation, at first, may appear devious, deceptive, or even unprofessional. Yet the very process of teaching is manipulative. We manipulate materials, curricula, and instructional techniques. We also manipulate students when using behavior management techniques. Watzlawick (1978) pointed out that one cannot influence--every communication must evoke responses and is, therefore, a manipulation. So, we might as well manipulate effectively, relevantly, and constructively.

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One of the easiest ways to manipulate students is through the use of surprise and shock (Farrelly & Brandsma, 1978). These two techniques help break up rigid mental sets. The unexpected always helps deal with resistant students--never do what is expected. I was working with a particularly oppositional youth at a psychiatric hospital. This boy, Elmer, hated to talk to his mother on the phone. When this mother called, he would immediately throw a tantrum, and usually escalated to the point of requiring restraint. As part of his treatment plan he had to talk to his mother when she called during free time. If he refused to talk to her, he was placed in time out and lost all his daily points. Various forms of positive reinforcement had been ineffective. Once during free time when the phone rang and I told Elmer that the call was for him, he immediately said "no way, I'm not going to talk to her" and he started walking toward the time out area. I put the phone to my ear and loudly said "yes, Mr. Simmons, Elmer is right here". Mr. Simmons was Elmer's principal. Elmer looked at me with a terrified expression on his face--after all, it is not

everyday that a child gets a call from this principal. Elmer slowly approached the phone and tentatively said "hello". Well, Mr. Simmons was not on the other end--his mother was. Elmer was so surprised and relieved not to have to talk to his principal that he said "Oh Mom, am I ever glad it's you on the phone." It is when you do the unexpected that you cause a lot of rearrangement in a student's thinking (Jacobson, 1983).

Another way to manipulate students is encouraging a response by frustrating it (Haley, 1973). In this approach, you should direct a student to behave in a certain way, and as the student begins to do so, cut off the response and shift to another area. When you return to that directive again, the student will be more responsive because he or she has developed a readiness to respond but was then frustrated (Haley, 1973).

I worked with a teacher who had a student that rarely answered questions nor offered much information aloud in class. The more the teacher tried to encourage the student to respond, the less the student responded. I told the teacher to be patient and observe the student carefully for even a slight attempt under any circumstances to talk in class. Right before the student was about to speak, I had the teacher briefly interrupt him. Again when the student was about to speak the teacher briefly interrupted, only this time the student blurted out the answer. By inhibiting the student from talking, it was possible to increase his desire to talk.

Amplify a Deviation

Teachers often feel helpless to change students' behavior. I disagree. I think we are very good at changing students' behavior. The problem is that the change often is in the wrong direction, and we may be oblivious to our effect on the student. I tell teachers to be encouraged if they get students to make any change in their behavior. Even if little Bobby starts pulling Sally's hair when the teacher told him to stop talking, that teacher obtained a change in behavior. The problem is that we rarely think of

this circumstance as an example of positive change. Yet it demonstrates we can effect change. It is a small change-- but a change nevertheless.

You can amplify on a deviation by starting with a small change and not become discouraged. It is most helpful in this regard to think of change as a kaleidoscope: change one small piece and the whole pattern changes. Another patient of Dr. Erickson's had claustrophobia (Rosen, 1982). She agreed only to sit in his office if the door was left wide open. Dr. Erickson responded by saying, "Suppose instead of having the door wide open it lacked one millimeter of being wide open?" She agreed. Dr. Erickson then worked up to two millimeters, three millimeters, a centimeter, half an inch, an inch. Dr. Erickson is telling us to deal with difficult problems bit by bit.

Conclusion

We sometimes only think in terms of targeting the student's behavior for intervention and ignore our own behavior. There is a simple axiom we should follow: If what you're doing isn't working, try something else--anything else. If we think of intervening as the introduction of variety and richness into a student's life, then our goal is to free the student from the limitations and restrictions of a social network in difficulty.

Accomplishing this task involves learning to be flexible, creative, to have a sense of humor about ourselves and the world, and to look to the future. The ability to modify what we do by not restricting ourselves to set patterns of behaving allows us to tap and make available those resources we have in order to help students become self-sufficient individuals. Because we are teachers, we view our options for intervening on students in very limited ways--usually the ways described in textbooks and presented in university courses. We must go beyond the perceived approaches to try something new. One thing that all students teach you is that there are different ways of looking at situations. Managing resistance should not be a massive job. We usually know what to do--but do not always know that we know.

On a final note, I was conducting a family therapy session while employed as a counselor at a psychiatric hospital. In the middle of the session the mother stood up and said, "It sure would help the situation out if my husband didn't leave his clothes around the house all the time!" Although I was taken quite by surprise at this unexpected digression, I asked the lady how long her husband has left his clothes around the house. She replied that he had been leaving his clothes around the house for the entire 10 years of their marriage. I asked her what she did when her husband left his clothes around the house. She responded that she yelled at him. I looked at her squarely in the eyes and said "congratulations, you have really given yelling a chance to work-- 10 years is a long time to try one thing. Now are you ready to try something different!"

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