

Appendix D: Examining the “It Works” Fallacy

As discussed in Chapter 2, beware of any phrase that includes the term “it works.” This phrase can serve as a red flag! Phrases such as “This is what works with these students,” “It is the only thing that works,” or “Well, it works for me” are indicators that the practice should be carefully reconsidered. Strictly by definition, just about any practice that anyone or any organization has used “works” to some degree. For example, a life of crime “works” for many people, at least for a while. Medicating problems “works” for the addict. There are even those who argue that slavery “worked” in this country for hundreds of years. If we are looking to achieve greater levels of management effectiveness, our question should not be whether it “works” but “does it work to achieve a truly desirable outcome?” Even if the outcome seems to be desirable in the short term or within some narrow perspective, it may require a broader examination and/or a consideration of what that practice is producing in the long term that is necessary to recognize the function or dysfunction of any practice. (Remember, those who defend really bad or evil ideas such as slavery often did so because the practices were perceived to have been working for a long time and would have been too much trouble to change.)

Figure (2.6) depicts a comparison of two concepts. One column represents the practical as well as psychological foundations of the phrase “it works” referring to classroom management practices. The other column outlines the concept of the empirical reality of classroom management practices that lead to desirable outcomes -- that is they actually do work.

Figure 2.6: Deconstructing the Psychology behind Phrases that include “It Works”

The “It Works” Fallacy	What Actually Works
Practices that are justified by such phrases as “it works for me,” or “it works with my students,” or “it is the only thing that works with the students at this school.”	Practices that demonstrate efficacy in both theory and practice.
Based in mental constructions/concepts.	Based in empirical reality.
Practices that make the teacher only feel that they are doing something and having an effect	Practices grounded in the laws of human behavior and cause-and-effect. Takes into account human needs and nature.
Helps the teacher reinforce and confirm their constructed view of reality -- usually characterized by a fatalistic concept of the “real world.”	Through trial and error, praxis, hypothesis testing, and a process of reflective analysis the teacher learns what actually produces desirable effects.
Typically produces a short-term effect that only superficially confirms a desired effect	Produces a long-term positive effect. In essence makes tomorrow more functional as a result of what was done today.
As with other coping mechanisms, there is some cyclical relief from the perceived problem condition as a result of implementing the strategy. But the cycle (problem, relief, dormant period, reappearance, or need for coping mechanism) will repeat itself unless the teacher experiences a need for it to change (usually coming from an external cause) and breaks the cycle.	As with any functional behavior, teacher interventions are consciously and <i>freely</i> chosen to meet the specific demands of the situation. They are neither reactive nor compulsive.
Familiar enough to students that they do not resist or question the logic. Often this is due to the strategies being similar to strategies that are used in the students’ home lives.	May or may not feel initially familiar to students, but after a period of use, inherently more satisfying and recognized for their ability to promote more functional and healthy behavior and relationships.

Practices typically achieve the (often superficial) appearance of having an emotional impact. Practices work to display the power of the teacher on a surface level.

Requires an ongoing “cognitive rationalization” to self and others to maintain. Therefore, conscious awareness is essentially an enemy, as it illuminates the faulty reasoning and unconscious motivations behind the strategy.

Examples include:

Punishments
Public shaming (names on the board or colored cards)
Teacher as boss/judge
Use of excessive extrinsic rewards
Personal praise and disappointment

Practices lead to real learning on the part of the students and therefore eventually true behavior change and maturity. Practices work to display the teacher’s intentions to promote more functional behavior.

Is consistently confirmed in both principle and outcome. Therefore, conscious awareness is essentially a friend in the process. It leads to greater levels of understanding.

Examples include:

**Promoting a success psychology
Meeting basic needs
Taking meaningful action
Promoting responsibility
Promoting clarity of expectations
Promoting intrinsic motivation**

Invariably the use of practices defined by the “it works with my students” mentality is accompanied by a corresponding view of human nature and the nature of classroom management. This view is characterized by a fixed view of ability and behavior (Dweck, 1999) and an external view of causality. This mentality is defined by phrases such as “Students just are (a certain way).” For example “These students just have trouble listening.” This external and fixed ability/intelligence mentality assumes that problems are inevitable and perpetual. As a result the teacher accepts the practical reality that solutions will require a form of continually necessary short-term interventions and the psychological reality that it is the best that one can do. The result is the maintenance of an external locus of control and a dispositional millstone that keeps the class heading downward on the effectiveness continuum.

Much like phrases that include the words “it works,” phrases that include the words “it does not work” can be based in flawed logic. Sound practices will work. Someone is currently using that particular sound practice to get positive results with students in a similar situation or environment. When we use phrases such as “I tried that but it did not work” -- especially related to strategies that characterize the 1-Style approach -- we might listen for one of the following justifications. First, are we implying that we have a lack of commitment to the practice? Second, are we trying to conceal that we lack the skill necessary to make it work? Third, are we suggesting a lack of understanding of the practice or a picture of what it looks like when it comes to fruition? With enough time, commitment, skill, and knowledge of what we want as a result, any truly effective practice will work with any set of students, with very rare exceptions.

Chapter Reflection 2-k: Recall the last time you heard a teacher say, “That won’t work with these kids.” Do your own investigative research and see if you can discover any teachers who are in fact succeeding with that strategy in a similar situation.