

Appendix H: A Catalogue of Common Sources of Classroom Drama

As we discussed in Chapter 3, unconscious psychological dramas operate under the level of awareness. Drama can take the form of subtle or not-so-subtle power plays, social systems, and manipulative behavior patterns. They may seem necessary, but as we take a closer look we can see that they exist only if the participants keep them active. Moreover, in many cases they can seem harmless, such as an occasional exchange of sarcasm or verbal sparring. In a climate of trust and respect, they can be innocuous.

As you examine the list of psychological games and dramas below, you will see that in many cases the destructive effect can be significant. Some teachers confuse these games with the class “personality” or the existence of a “dynamic” atmosphere. But as one recognizes the price paid by both teacher and student, it is clear that they are inherently lose-lose games.

Power Struggles

Power struggles are typically less about power and more about pride. They exist because the participants are attempting to defend something that is illusory (ego), and take their awareness off the goal (the best outcome for all concerned and/or accountability for actions). With enough clarity and awareness of one’s reactive tendencies (defensiveness, insecurity, need to be right, need to be seen as important, etc.), power struggles do not need to exist (see conflict resolution and power struggles in Chapter 13). Moreover, while conflict resolution skills are useful, there is no substitute for the self-awareness of what the ego is telling us when we get the urge to engage a student in a power struggle. Ultimately the ability to choose constructive action over the reactive tendency to give into defensiveness will be the most effective way to achieve positive results in these cases.

Social Darwinism

We could also refer to this phenomenon as the “survival of the fittest.” As depicted so vividly in the book *The Lord of the Flies*, in the absence of a functioning social structure the advantage goes to the advantaged. In the case of school-aged children this often takes the form of the popular oppressing the unpopular, the strong oppressing the weak, and the haves oppressing the have-nots. This drama may be natural, but it is not much fun for those on the losing end and produces a psychologically damaging set of lessons for all concerned. The intensity of Social Darwinism is often exacerbated by the actions of the teacher. When the teacher plays power games, promotes a competitive climate, and incorporates what could be described as a “pain-based logic,” this triggers the students’ instinct for survival and self-defense. The result is a climate characterized by a cycle of attack-and-defend, where no members of the class are spared. Given a climate defined by a “success psychology” and a functional set of social bonds, the level of Social Darwinism can be substantially mitigated.

Psychological Games

Most unconscious psychological games are not played to win, but to meet a need. And unfortunately for the player, these games cannot be won. As we look closer at the dynamics of each of these games we see that the need that is motivating the players will never be satisfied. These games are lose-lose. Here are a few examples of such psychological games.

- **Sarcasm.** A teacher may say, “Hey I can’t believe it, a boy in this class finally got an answer right.” It can seem funny and be amusing on the surface. However, examine the underlying message of sarcasm. It can be described as: “I will put you down to get a laugh from the class and show that I am powerful enough to put down you or someone else because it feeds my ego.” The truth is that the use of sarcasm is a sign of

insecurity. Moreover, it creates an underlying fear on the part of the students that they will be victimized. Negative energy will always return to its source.

- **“I can top that.”** Many teachers subscribe to the notion that the students need to be shown who is boss. Instead of clear expectations and explicit boundaries, these teachers rely on the tenuous reality that that they can be more clever than their students. The belief is that if the students recognize that the teacher is more witty and sharp, they will learn that they cannot win, will give up their attempts at testing and feel respect in the process. While on the surface it may not seem so, this game is fueled by a sense of inadequacy on the part of the teacher. Like all other psychological dramas played out in the classroom, the result will be the win of an occasional daily battle, but a war that can never be won.
- **Who can best justify their role as victim.** Many teachers come from families and external relationships in which temporary high ground can be won by the individual who can express the most injury and is therefore most deserving of sympathy and reparations (e.g., “They changed the schedule again, and did not tell us until today, so how am I supposed to teach with all this craziness?”). This victim drama, like the others, may achieve a desired short-term effect. It may encourage students to leave the teacher alone for a while and provide a momentary respite from one’s sense of persistent guilt and responsibility. Over time, the effect will be a weakening of confidence in the teacher and a license for students to use the role of victim themselves to avoid responsibility. In the extreme, we could refer to the effect as producing what we will term in Chapter 7, a “failure psychology.”
- **My Negativity will Lead to Your Positive Outcome.** Most of us have spent a great deal of our lives believing that negativity is useful and necessary. Whether it takes the form of complaining, chronicling failure, put downs, shaming, punishments, disappointment, guilt, or something else, negativity will never produce long-term positive outcomes. As discussed in Chapter 2, it may “work” for us, but it will never produce effective results. It is a mental game that makes one feel a little better for a little while. Once in a while it has the short-term effect of modifying student behavior, but the negative long-term effect will nearly always outweigh any apparent positive result. Negativity begets negativity. Spend 10 minutes in a class where the teacher uses a great deal of negativity, you will feel the negative climate, see it on the faces, and hear it in the words of the students in the class. For the teacher who cannot believe that they can live without the use of negativity, try it for a week and discover what you find. You might be surprised.

“I don’t do those things,” you say. Wonderful! Nevertheless, challenge yourself to pay attention to the dynamics in your class for a week. What kinds of expressions do you notice on students’ faces that you did not pay attention to before? How many times do you find yourself getting defensive or reactive? How many times do you find yourself unconsciously using negativity? As you begin to recognize the presence of the games, begin to be cognitive of their price.

What is the harm done by the existence of these social and psychological dramas? Here are just a few:

- They stunt the development of the effectiveness of the Classroom Management in the future. It drags down the effectiveness and function continuum.

- They stunt the growth of all the individual members of the class and impede the development of self-responsibility and conscious awareness.
- They stunt the growth of the collective. They work against your efforts toward collective functioning and the creation of a classroom community. For a community to thrive it requires a climate of emotional safety, security, and risk taking.
- Psychological dramas create a threatening ingredient and keep students confined to a state of self-defense and survival.

What is left? If I give up all my reactive dramas, won't the class be uneventful and dull? The answer is an emphatic "No!" If you are having trouble conceiving of management without these dramas and games, then it may be a good time to reflect on your approach to teaching.

What is left? The answer is more of the "natural condition" -- i.e. the learning, joy, appreciation, creativity, a sense of ease and emotional safety, true relationship, respect, self-responsibility, motivation and achievement with less stress and struggle throughout the day.