

CLASSROOM PRESENCE

Pocketbook



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The presence problem



We all know teachers who command attention the moment they walk into a room; they have immediate presence that communicates itself to pupils, often without a word having been spoken.

But pupils don't sit in class thinking: *'I respect this teacher; they have great presence'*. It's an unconscious process. Children and teenagers 'read' their teachers and respond on an emotional level, depending on what they look and sound like; what kind of example they set and how they carry themselves.

It can be hard to get useful feedback from lesson observations about the kind of impact you make on your class. Occasionally, teachers may get the comment that they 'lack presence' in the classroom. This is a euphemism for 'poor behaviour management' and is rarely accompanied by any ideas about how to increase that elusive presence.

Your classes, however, are full of children who have no such inhibitions concerning feedback and who will, if you learn to look for and interpret it, provide you with limitless feedback about your level of presence in the classroom – every hour of every day!

Presence is taught in other contexts



As teachers we are used both to reflecting on unconscious or sub-conscious processes and to teaching about them. We do it when we show pupils how to infer or how to analyse the subtext in a novel or play, for instance. Yet, when it comes to teacher training and development, learning about and exploiting this level of communication barely features.

Business people, politicians and actors – all professionals who need to command an audience – are routinely trained in how to increase their presence and become more effective and compelling communicators. So why not teachers?

Competence in this area is a key indicator in how effectively we manage our classes and provide quality teaching over the span of a career.



Linking acting and teaching



It was when working with PGCE students who were struggling to assert themselves in the classroom that I first saw how useful they would find the acting techniques I was teaching my 'A' Level Drama students.

Later in my career I became a teaching and learning coach and over the years developed the eclectic approach to establishing effective classroom presence that I will be outlining in this book. I now regularly work with teachers to:

- Interpret feedback that students are giving them
- Understand the subtext and implications of their reactions to events in class
- Maximise the power of body and voice
- Understand how to use space in the classroom effectively
- Show how assertiveness, rapport and status can be a transformational triad
- Conquer their demons, eg if you struggle to say 'no' in life, you may well struggle in the classroom

Presence and persona



The first key to understanding is this:

Presence is the effect created by your teacher persona

So, what is a teacher persona and how do you create one?

There are various ways to think about this question, but the most fun is to go and see some stand-up comedy. In most theatre performances, the actors have to ignore the audience to draw them into the world of the play. Comedians, on the other hand have, to work *with* their audience, whose response is crucial to the entertainment. They have to engage with and control hecklers and they have to make the audience like them; otherwise, they get no laughs and die the death of a thousand cuts. Not that different from the classroom...

Persona



From stage to classroom



Of course, there are differences between a stand-up comic's job and a teacher's, but the similarities are clear. Any good stand up will have a likeable persona but will also be sufficiently dominant and assertive not to be victimised by their audience or by hecklers. Remember how, apparently effortlessly, your favourite teachers managed to inspire, entertain and control you? It's the same thing.

On walking into their classrooms, many successful teachers seem to put on an old, familiar coat – their teaching persona. The minute they enter the room their voice, tone, posture and attitude transform. This professional persona is not 'who they are'; it is 'who they are in the classroom', a construct that helps them to do their job.

New teachers, especially, balk at the idea that they cannot 'be themselves' in front of a class. Only after bitter experience, do they start to 'wear the coat' (or suit of armour in some cases!) that helps them to survive. One of the things you'll learn from this Pocketbook is a set of complementary skills to help you create a winning persona.



Surely you need more than just presence?



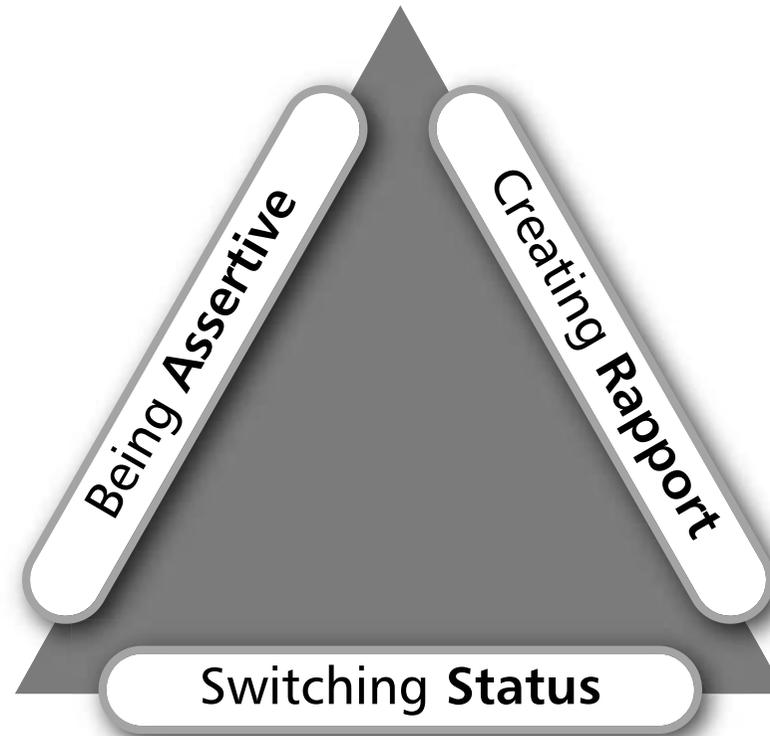
All good teachers are willing and able to use school discipline systems when necessary, it's just that the best ones rarely seem to need to. They have managed to transcend the need for sanctions in all but the most difficult situations.

In fact, all teachers, with enough awareness and practice, can reach that level of competence and influence, developing a truly powerful presence in the classroom.

Working nowadays with teachers at various stages of their careers, I teach a **triad of skills** which, combined, create this powerful presence and allow you as a teacher to back up your persona with confidence, based on the ability to be **assertive**, to create **rapport** and to understand how to switch **status** at will.

As well as the skill triad, other areas I'll be covering in this book include ways to build relationships and to connect with your students using techniques from NLP, psychology and acting.

Skills triad



About the author

Rob Salter



Rob graduated in French from The University of East Anglia and has an MA in Theatre Directing from Hull University. He worked as a freelance theatre director in London in the early 1990's and co-ran St. Raph's Children's Theatre. He has been a member of the Royal Court Theatre's Adult Writers' Group and has had rehearsed readings of a number of his plays.

It was during a sixteen-year period of teaching Drama in London schools that Rob first began to include performance techniques in his mentoring of student teachers. He became a Teaching and Learning Coach whilst working as a Special Needs Teacher. His popular website www.teaching-strategies-for-classroom-discipline.com, is a free online resource for teachers, on behaviour management, differentiation and special education issues. It carries details of his self-published *Behaviour Blueprint* (2011)

Rob now runs Meta Consulting – an educational consultancy specialising in metacognitive approaches to teaching and learning – and delivers individual teacher coaching via video call. He is currently working with a number of London secondary schools as a virtual coach, and is helping them to set up in-house coaching programmes.

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