Tips on how to control the classroom

Whatever your personal style, all teachers are performers and the classroom is their stage. But success can depend on the kind of show you put on!

Why do some teachers struggle to control a class while others manage to get a lesson flowing seamlessly with apparently little effort?

It could simply be down to the “presence” they have in the classroom. This is a vague term, but learning how to have presence, or build on what you already possess, could create a more harmonious and effective classroom and strengthen your relationship with your pupils. Broadly, the word means being able to use your personality and body to command attention.

Develop teacher presence:

Anyone can learn these skills, according to Mark Almond, a senior lecturer at Canterbury Christ Church University who trains teachers in the art of creating presence. But not everybody gets the chance.

“Some educators blanch at the idea that teacher presence should be included in training, as it is such a vague term,” he says. “But I believe this is an area teachers want to be trained in. They think their existing training lacks how to develop interpersonal skills, how to create your own identity and connect with pupils.”

Some actors use the Alexander technique to relax – gently realigning the body, breathing from deep in the lungs and using the body economically. This can also be useful for teachers who struggle to relax.

“You may be feeling awful at having to walk into a classroom of 15-year-olds, but if you display your anxieties to that class, you will have problems,” Mr Almond says. “Walk in to the room slowly with your posture straight, chin up, make eye contact and speak to your pupils in a clear and audible voice.”

Looking physically confident will help to create presence. A good posture makes a person look strong and commanding. Keep your head still when you talk, and speak slowly.

Guy Michaels, an actor-turned-teacher who now runs courses for the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA) on how to create classroom presence, says: “Nerves can prevent teachers from communicating effectively. Many teachers will explain a task, then explain it again, using a different set of words. This confuses the class and any clarity is gone. You are not allowing the idea to sink in.”

Teachers should grow comfortable with using stillness and silence as part of their repertoire. “Many teachers say ‘I’m not a performer’, but they have an audience of 30 people waiting to be entertained,” says Mr Michaels. “Teachers often work to rigid lessons, they are obsessed with planning, and there is a danger they can lose their flexibility. They should listen and improvise, be excited and infectious.”
Masking your anxieties:

So how do you mask your nerves and transform unhelpful body language? The first step is to get rid of any signs of tension. And the way you breathe is a key factor.

“If you can’t take deep breaths, you can’t speak with authority and resonance. It’s a waste of energy and affects where your breath comes from,” Mr Michaels says.

“Children pick up on signals of fear. The first thing you have to do is understand your fight or flight response – what happens when your body releases adrenalin. It gives you a low status. These are physical signs like fidgeting, a stooped head and sweaty palms.”

But how do you avoid them? He advises teachers to “stand as tall as you can be. It gives you an anchoring and this helps to keep you grounded and calm.

“Scale your physical presence up or down. Use gestures to punctuate what you are saying and move around in the space if you want a big presence. This helps you appear to be a strong, confident teacher.”

Many of our nervous physical ticks can be unconscious. A good way to start tackling them is to ask a trusted colleague to observe you and give their candid thoughts on your body language and other physical traits. Or try video-recording yourself. It is incredible how much the small screen amplifies even the slightest movement.

Pause for thought:

Another tip is simply to pause. This allows you to organise your thoughts, so you can avoid repeating yourself, and makes you appear calm and in control.

Observe others in authority who appear to have an inbuilt confidence. Why are they watchable; what are they doing right?

People with charisma use their body effectively. Eye contact is one of the most important weapons in a teacher’s arsenal. Try this simple physical test: ask your pupils to face you and put their arms up. They should then begin slowly lowering them until you make eye contact. Each time you do, they must freeze. The aim is to make sure that no pupil ends up with their hands in their laps.

Eye contact can help vary the pace and energy of a lesson. “If you want a different effect, stay still and cast a net around the room with your eyes,” Mr Michaels adds. This will help to give you an aura of authority – and make them take notice of you.

Using the space of the classroom differently can also vary the dynamics of the lesson. Try teaching from a different area, at a different height or even sitting on a desk with pupils.

Presence means you can set the tone in your classroom.

You as the storyteller:

Think of yourself as a storyteller, conveying a secret through your teaching. Vary your language: use active verbs to create excitement and an emotional response. Create anticipation or intrigue with props or timing, letting each activity be revealed one at a time.

Appear energetic and eager to talk about your subject. It might be the thousandth time you have taught a topic, but behave as if you are enjoying yourself. Enthusiasm is contagious.

Adjust the tone and volume of your voice to convey emotion and alter the pace of the lesson.

Teachers are not actors but some theatrics can create a buzz. Why not use over-the-top gestures from time to time, to express delight, mock boredom or surprise? Such charades – pretending to snore, feigning a heart attack (when appropriate) – can amuse and engage pupils. Having presence also means that you are confident enough to be spontaneous and improvise. This creates a vibrant lesson and can create energy if it starts to lag; it also means that you can respond swiftly if pupils become disruptive.

According to Rob Salter, a London teacher who trains his peers in how to create presence, US president Barack Obama is a perfect example of someone who already knows how to harness his charm.

“He shows how being still and pitching his voice lower…and from the diaphragm, gives an air of authority,” he says. “Presence is as much about how you perceive yourself. Cultivate it. You should set the tone and get children to buy into your vision. “Have a part of the classroom which is the equivalent of the front of a stage. Use it when you need to get the focus back on you – for example, if the noise levels go up. This gives you an aura. Use different spaces to create different energies.”

The message is simple. By controlling the atmosphere of the lesson, you are showing pupils how to behave.
Exercises you can practise at home:

Tips from courses run by RADA, the National Theatre, Rob Salter and Mark Almond.

**Voice**

- Breathe in and hold for three seconds. As you breathe out, project your voice and say the days of the week; then try the months; then the alphabet. This helps you to speak from the chest, not from the back of the throat.
- To seem authoritative, practise your breathing to find your “home note” – your own distinctive voice – from your chest.

**Physicality**

- Stand in a grounded way. To find your “centre”, stand with feet apart and bend your knees slightly.
- Lengthen your spine. Stand as if your head is being pulled up by a string. Hunching reduces your capacity to breathe properly.
- Release tension by swinging your arms from your shoulders. You can extend this to “shake out” your whole body.
- To calm breathing, raise your arms slowly as you breathe in, and bring them down again while exhaling and making a “ssshh” sound.
- To check you are breathing from your diaphragm, try stamping your foot while shouting “ha” as you breathe out.
- Imagine you are blowing up a balloon with a long, slow, outward breath through the mouth until there is no air left in your lungs. Then, on the in breath, through the nose, imagine you are smelling a bunch of flowers.
- Think about eye contact – aim to look open and receptive. Make eye contact with your pupils, even if you are shy.
- Scale your physical presence up or down.
- Use gestures to punctuate what you say and move around in the space if you want to create a bigger presence. This helps you to appear strong and confident.
- To create an aura around yourself, stay still and cast a net around the room with your eyes.
- To bring your energy into the room, stand with your feet planted and say “I am here”, taking one step with each word. Tread firmly on the floor and say the words out loud.

**Varied use of space**

- Teach from the back of the classroom.
- Kneel or crouch down between desks or at the front of the room.
- Sit at a desk, on the floor or on a chair or table.
- Try entering the pupils’ physical space; sit next to them, lean on their desks, walk slowly between desks.

**Adopt a relaxed and positive facial expression**

- Give yourself a facial massage, concentrating on your forehead, cheeks and jaw.
- Practise relaxing and using your facial muscles by widening eyes, puffing out cheeks, stretching your mouth into different shapes and flexing your chin. Now scrunch up your face as tightly as possible.
- Move your eyebrows up and down. Try to move one at a time.
- Break into a big grin with wide eyes.

Source: [http://newteachers.tes.co.uk/content/how-develop-teacher-presence-and-command-attention-class](http://newteachers.tes.co.uk/content/how-develop-teacher-presence-and-command-attention-class)