Positive Reinforcement Versus Punishment as a Classroom Management Tool

Common sense suggests that when one pedagogical technique is shown to be largely effective for achieving a particular objective and a second technique is shown to be largely ineffective, the former would be used by at least a sizable minority of teachers while the latter would be ignored by most. Well, common sense does not always prevail, particularly in the case of using positive reinforcement and punishment as classroom management tools. As we’ve documented on these pages, few teachers use positive reinforcement in their classrooms despite its demonstrated effectiveness in promoting desired behaviors. Various forms of punishment, which have numerous disadvantages, are more popular.

One reason for this contrary state of affairs undoubtedly has to do with the decline in popularity of operant conditioning theory in educational psychology textbooks and courses. It is not unusual these days for students in teacher education programs to have learned little or nothing about operant conditioning principles and their classroom applications. As a result, many teachers fall into what is called the negative reinforcement trap. Here’s how it works: A student’s misbehavior instinctively elicits a punishing response from a teacher because punishment can be administered quickly and easily and often produces a rapid (albeit temporary) suppression of the undesired behavior. Let’s say the teacher sends the offending student to the principal’s office. Having obtained at least temporary relief, the teacher is now more inclined to send the next misbehaving student to the office. Now let’s examine this situation from the student’s perspective. Some students may misbehave because they find the
work boring or, even worse, threatening because of a fear of failure. Sending such a student out of the room removes the student from a punishing environment. This is a form of negative reinforcement, which increases the likelihood that the student will engage in subsequent misbehavior.

Have you seen the type of situation described here during your own schooling? What do you think about it?

Additional Take a Stand! Questions:

1. What are some reasons why punishment tends to be used more often than positive reinforcement as a management strategy?
2. In addition to the scenario described above, what are some other problems that result from relying solely on punishment as a management strategy?
3. What are some potential benefits and drawbacks related to reinforcing students for appropriate behaviors in front of their peers?

Related Web Resources:

http://www.as.wvu.edu/~sbb/comm221/chapters/rf.htm
This link contains an article on reinforcement theory including examples and limitations as well as recommendations for implementing reinforcement theory.

http://www.kihd.gmu.edu/immersion/knowledgebase/strategies/behaviorist/OperantConditioning.htm
This link contains an article on operant conditioning and its connection to instruction.

http://maxweber.hunter.cuny.edu/pub/eres/EDSPC715_MCINTYRE/Tokens.html
This link contains an article that discusses token economies and provides some recommendations for using token economies.