Graham Crane

Discover your winning streak

Redaktion:
Gertraud Havranek

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Contents:

0.   Introduction

This study is about the co-operative solution to a discipline problem encountered when teaching English in a 7th form to a group of weaker learners (third ability group). Initially there were 8 pupils in the group. As from February 1998, there were 13.

In the following I will first describe the background and the red card system adopted to solve the problem. Then I will outline the implications of the system for teacher and pupils. As a next step I will discuss the idea behind the "red card game" before presenting the pupils`evaluation of the system. Since the red card system had an impact on classroom interaction, as a conclusion I will indicate how the study has influenced my teaching.

1.   Why it became necessary to introduce and develop the red card system

On returning from the PFL-seminar I found the group in an uproar. The supplementary teacher had presented the week´s programme, which I had outlined, in a rather non-communicative way. The group vibes were negative. I had second thoughts about EMI in a weaker learner group, and began to detect and diagnose more weaknesses than strengths among the pupils. The change in group attitude caused me no end of concern. Teaching became virtually impossible. Conflict became the rule of the day.

After two weeks of such madness I decided that if I were to carry on with cross curriculum work, in that group, there would have to be a change of attitude within the group. A workable level in group interaction would have to be established before continuing. The English curriculum topic "Me and my home" - household duties, rules etc provided me with the necessary opening to suggest classroom rules, football rules etc. Rules in football were therefore made use of as a basis for the "red card system" in the classroom.

2.   The red card system: development and implementation

The red card system was chosen in order to restore things to a workable level within the group. Various forms and strategies to implement the system were discussed in class; some of the suggestions were made by the students to help improve the working atmosphere. I

prepared four yellow and eight red cards with the names of each pupil. The following rules were agreed on:

a) Any further disturbance or lesson interruption would be responded to with a yellow card as a warning.
b) Any further or subsequent problem caused would be dealt with a red card or red cards.
c) It was unanimously and irreversibly agreed upon that on receiving a yellow or red card all objections, explanations, or excuses or any other form of reclamation would be overruled and not entered into until the end of the week in a "detention time" specially reserved for such purposes.
d) A positive approach or attitude shown by the pupil(s), could result in the card(s) being withdrawn i.e. taken back by the teacher.
e) Cards were to be stored, by pupils, on receiving, in an envelope provided at the back of their exercise books.

At first I as the teacher handed out yellow and red cards when disruptions occured. Later, pupils sometimes took over as referees.

3.   Implications

3.1   The implications, advantages and disadvantages of the red card system for me as the teacher

a) I could get on with teaching - I didn´t have to continually interrupt, disrupt the lesson for disciplinary measures. The problem was marked with a card and as such, it was "out" of the lesson.

b) It reduced the stage effect. It didn´t allow an individual disruption to become a class disruption. It was handled at a direct and individual level.

c) It took lengthy arguments, detective work, witness statements, endless explanations and declarations of innocence, out of the lesson, and defused a lot of the aggression caused thereby. Problems were not recycled through the group.

d) I was not involved - didn´t have to become a policeman or disciplinary officer! I could remain teacher, it also gave me a certain diplomatic licence, or immunity - allowing for less personal conflict. Disciplinary action was carried out by the referee, not the teacher!

e) It gave me time and distance to become unloaded, defused and avoid any overreaction, on my part, to any interruptive action.

f)   An otherwise explosive situation became defused, by a fun reaction, "okay, you´re out!".

g)   The problem was able to remain the problem and not the pupil became a problem or a problem pupil. The pupil had achieved a certain immunity. The card represented or symbolized the problem and not the pupil.

h)   It did away with lists of defaulters, which I continually mislaid, (the class knew this!), or which had to be kept or written up by fellow pupils. These lists, unfortunately, even aggravated group vibes by promoting unnecessary aggression.

i)   It forced me to observe efforts made by the pupils to change their disruptive behaviour and to respond, by praising their efforts and by sugggesting the possible withdrawal of the red card.

j)   It made me more conscious of my actions, so as to avoid the risk of being awarded a red card myself, since reciprocity was inherent in the system ("Watch my p´s and q´s").

k)   It improved my preparation - made me more sensitive to the distinction between errors and mistakes, minor and major misdemeanors.

l)   It caused me to feel obliged to substantiate, explain & justify my action to various colleagues.
         It caused the pupils or gave them a chance to reflect on the actions of the lessons - be it that of the teacher or fellow pupils. It gave them reason to voice their opinions leading to a type of group and self development process. They became engaged in active thought and action research.

m)   It led to open discussions as to fairness or unfairness, in regard to certain measures taken during previous lessons. Discipline seemed to have become a group or class concern and not really the teacher´s problem. I felt more like a linesman rather than a referee. The class really took control of self- or class-discipline - I could get on with my job of work.

n)   It was rather unpredictable - a very interesting feature which kept interest awake.

o)   Work outcome seemed to be directly associated with the change of attitude and as such influenced the future planning of the class programme which I had proposed.

p)   My attention was focussed on strengths rather than on weaknesses. I began to adopt and to adapt to the group.

q)   It seemed, or I had the feeling, that each learner achieved his/her learning potential.

r)   Group/partner work improved - as the group dynamics progressed

s)   The detention sessions became discussion sessions.
         The problem was discussed, recylced and became the focus of the "lesson" - it seemed a natural on-going process to complete or discuss what had happened.

t)   It led to a willingness to discuss and reflect together on work and behaviour.

u)   Learner responsibility evolved - they became involved. It became their personalized system.

v)   The group seemed to discover itself and through observing them and myself we improved our understanding of each other.

3.2   The implications, advantages and disadvantages for the pupils

The following statements are based on my observations and on the interpretation of the actual comments made by the learners when asked about the red card system.

Positive!

1)   No great issue made of any matter - not postmortems and lengthy enquiries.

2)   No embarrassment - "saved faces".

3)   No platform or audience to play for; no innocent bystander drawn into it.

4)   Were able to get rid of the card - have it withdrawn - felt a need to participate.

5)   A certain challenge to improve and get the red card withdrawn or returned to sender. Develop and extend their "winning streak".

6)   A certain sense of achievement when the card was returned.

7)   No writing of massive disciplinary punishment exercises at home.

8)   The problem was open-ended - it had time to be rectified - time to be made good again.

9)   Pupils didn´t really feel that I, the teacher, was responsible - but the referee system or arrangement.

10)   Classroom was quieter, more active - pupils felt they "learnt" more.

11)   The pupils liked the teacher´s idea of the red card or liked the idea of being able to "award" the red card to the teacher.

12)   Became part of the interaction process.

Negative!

1)   Pupils wanted to discuss the problem or justify the action immediately - not after a delay of several days.

2)   They sometimes lost cards, if they didn´t remember to put them into the envelope provided.

3)   They had often forgotten, by the end of the week, what, or how, the disruption had occurred.

4)   Teacher didn´t forget, because the red card set had to be complete (8 cards) at the end of the week. If not, they had to be returned and consequences met. (Teacher couldn´t lose the lot!)

5)   Some pupils wanted to keep the stage or audience effect. They didn´t like having the audience removed. They wished to be able to have the disturbance echoed and if possible to obtain moral support for the disruption from the group of listeners and spectators.

4.   The ulterior and real purpose behind playing the red card game

*   What is a game?

I see a game, as a series of transactions, with a gimmick.

In this game, there is: -
(a) an ongoing series of complementary transactions,
(b) an ulterior transaction, which is the underlying message of the game,
(c) and a predictable payoff, which concludes the game and is the real purpose for playing.

We can discover what "games" we play: The child or parent in us might play games but the adult in us never plays games (Games People Play - Eric Bern). According to transactional analysis there are three people in every person - parent, adult and child. Games allow us to recognise the parent, adult or child in ourselves.

*   Why play the game?

-       to attract others to play - to respond.

-       keep communication lines open.

-       to reinforce confidence through repetition of the action - the replay contributes to the feeling, "I feel as if I have done this before".

-       pupil can become a winner if they so choose to - the choice is theirs.

- to activate transactional self-analysis, learning about one´s self. The way we want to affect other people and what we want to get out of it. A valuable tool, to be used, to know yourself, to know how you relate to others: to activate conscious self-control of how we operate with other people and how they operate with us.

*   **Why are the weaker learner´s good players?**

They are often unable to act reasonably and appropriately, and so disturb lesson progress. Their inappropriate behaviour, in class is child and ego-state activated - be it hostile, aggressive, sulky actions etc.

The red card sends a message, not only at parental or adult message level, but also at a child like ego level. Options are kept open to respond at adult or child like ego levels. The weaker learner often has difficulty in functioning effectively at an adult ego-state level and they are confused, feel discontented and misunderstood.

The red card system keeps communication lines open. It gives pupils time to shift and adjust. This was the ulterior motive behind "The Play to Win" in the "Red Card System".

5.   The pupil´s evaluation of the red card system

In order to make the assessment of the red card system less subjective, the pupils were asked to fill in a questionnaire before Christmas vacation. I wanted to examine the potential and relevance of the system and to find possible alternative strategies. In the following I want to summarize the answers given by the pupils. Questionnaire and individual answers are in the appendix. Anonymous answers were recorded for 9 pupils.

Question 1:
When asked about their feelings towards the system one pupil was happy, four were satisfied, one found it sufficient and three found it unsatisfactory.

Question 2:
The majority of the pupils expressed a positive or neutral attitude towards being given red and yellow cards.

Question 3:
One person agreed that they would do the same, if they were teachers, four pupils would not, the rest were undecided!

Question 4:

Five pupils stated they they received two yellow cards in a week, three pupils stated one card and one pupil never got any.

Question 5:
Asked about the number of red cards collected in a week only two pupils stated having received two cards; seven pupils stated not having received any!

Question 6:
Most pupils claim to store the card in the envelope provided.

Question 7:
As to cards being allocated in other areas namely corridors, playground of the school premises etc there was a unanimous "no".

Question 8 & 9:
The majority of the pupils judge the system and the teacher as fair.

Question 10:
When asked about their reactions, when they felt unfairly treated - most pupils claimed to tell the teacher, followed by telling the parents or the class teacher or headmaster.

Question 11:
Eight out of nine pupils stated that they could accept a red card in good spirit without a great deal of fuss.

There was some confusion in answering questions twelve and thirteen perhaps because of the structure.

Question 12:
Most pupils seem to like the teacher´s complaining or shouting at them, but dislike written punishment and telling their parents.

Question 13:
They describe a person who doesn´t like them as someone who.....

-        does not give them a red card,
-        does not ignore them,
-        lies to them, but does not complain to their parents.
-        They are not sure whether such a person complains to them.
From my point of view the inconsistencies in question 12 & 13 were interesting.

Question 14:
Question 14, which examined the possibility of becoming a winner, to my mind referred to the most important aspect of the whole questionnaire.
Asked to state the time period used to have the card recalled by the teacher;

o   five said it took them one lesson;
o   two said they needed two lessons;
o   one said three lessons;

o   one said four lessons.

Question 15:
In 5 cases parents had heard or been told about the system.

Question 16:
Pupils were asked to create an advertising slogan for the system. However, the question caused confusion as some understood selling or getting rid of the system and not just advertising. (See appendix for suggestions!)

Question 17:
Asked as to whether teachers should be given red cards too, eight answered with yes; and one with no.

At the end of the questionnaire pupils were asked to make any comments they wanted to about the system (anonymous).
Eleven positive and seven negative statements were recorded (see samples in appendix).

6.   Conclusions from the study - What action research had done for me

1)   It had raised my awareness and led me to re-decide my role - lecturer or faciliator?

2)   It has made me ask myself, whether my teaching is really pupil-centered, or not?

3)   It has been important concerning my attitude towards mistakes.

   a)   It made me ask myself, "What is a mistake?"

   b)   It has caused me to question how I now deal with, or make use of these "mistakes" and the appropriateness or acceptability thereof.

   c)   I feel more confident now in adopting a more flexible and less narrow-minded attitude to "mistakes". I have, for years, always felt rather guilty, when regarding the error as intrinsic to any learning process. My colleagues were often not keen to accept such an approach or attitude. Now there seems to be a lot more interest in this aspect, perhaps it has been brought to the surface by EMI.

4)   Now it has become even harder to tell what is more important? To practice what we teach or teach what we practice?

5) It has led to a new look at real objectives such as the function of knowledge or skills, us as individuals, and us, as members of society in the European Union.

6) It has reasured me that the learning process is no less important than the learning-content. The experience of the learning process is just as important.

7) It has helped me in my efforts to reduce teacher domination and promote learner collaboration.

8) Last, but not least, it has caused me to take a new look at my pupils and I have found a lot of potential, where I sometimes felt it was lacking! - Especially amoung the third streamers or the weaker learners.

7.   My personal feelings

In observing myself I really got to know others.

An elderly lady (aged 87) one wrote: "*If I had my life to live over, I´d try to make more mistakes next time; I would relax, I would limber up. I would be sillier than I have been on this trip. I would be less hygenic. I would eat more ice-cream and less beans. I would have more actual troubles and fewer imaginary ones. I would ride on more merry-go-rounds*"
(Extract taken from essay "I´d pick more daisies" by Nadine Stair).

There is a lot of worthwhile thought in these lines and somehow, as a teacher, perhaps the troubles are really imaginary ones. I now ask myself whether they are actual troubles or not, and if so, not perhaps self-made? Perhaps to be a little sillier, not so sane and sensitive would be an advantage, or perhaps even a necessity, in order to retain our "sanity", in the classroom. To me the whole thing seemed silly, but to the group it was quite a sensible idea, and it worked - what more could I have asked for? We could finally get on with our work again.

Two epigrams of Oscar Wilde are worth thinking about and are perhaps appropriate:"Life is the only thing that is never real" perhaps such could be said of our classroom life. The other is:*"That we should treat all trivial things very seriously, and all serious things in life with sincere and studied triviality"*. (Richard Ellmar 1987:398); (Oscar Wilde - Salome Richard Ellmar 1987:398)

The aims and techniques were unworkable, and I had to find alternative strategies that would work and in doing so I stumbled across the red card system. It might seem a lot of kibosh or kerfuffle about nothing at all - but it was rather like an Australian walkabout. A period of wandering about until we eventually got back to our starting point again.

8.   Acknowledgements

Appendix

Questionnaire F7Lg: III(a)   **Evaluation**

1. Are you happy with the yellow and red card system?

	1x	4x	1x	3x
1	2	3	4	5

2. Do you think it is a good idea to give yellow and red cards?

1x	3x	2x		3x
1	2	3	4	5

3. Would you do the same thing, if you were the teacher?

3x	1x	4x	1x
don´t know:	maybe:	no:	yes:

4. How many yellow cards do you collect in a week?

		5x	3x	1x	
4:	3:	2:	1:	0:	I can´t remember

5. How many red cards do you collect in a week?

							2x		7x
I can´t remember	8:	7:	6:	5:	4:	3:	2:	1:	0:

6. Do you remember to put the cards into the envelope provided?

sometimes:	no:	yes:	+1 unanswered:

7. Do you think red cards should also be given:-

			9x
* in corridors?	I don`t know:	yes:	no:

			9x
* in the school playground?	I don`t know:	yes:	no:

			9x
* off the school premises?	I don`t know:	yes:	no:

8. Do you think the red card system is unfair?

1x	8x

I don`t know: sometimes: no: yes:

9. Do you think the teacher is unfair?

	3x	6x	
I don`t know:	sometimes:	no:	yes:

10. When you think the teacher is wrong, do you:-

* say nothing and accept it?	0x
* disturb the lesson?	0x
* tell your teacher?	6x
* tell your class teacher/headmaster?	2x
* tell your parents?	1x

11. I take or accept a red card without a great deal of fuss:

		1x	8x
sometimes:	never:	no:	yes:

12. Do you like:-

	1x	6x	2x
* teacher`s complaining?	I don`t know:	yes:	no:
	1x	8x	
* giving written punishment?	I don`t know:	yes:	no:
		9x	
* teacher telling your parents?	I don`t know:	yes:	no:
	4x	5x	
* shouting at you?	I don`t know:	yes:	no:

13. A person, who doesn`t like you:-

	2x	7x	
* gives you a red card!	I don`t know:	yes:	no:
	4x	5x	
* ignores you!	I don`t know:	yes:	no:
	1x	6x	2x
* lies to you!	I don`t know:	yes:	no:
	4x	5x	
* complains to you!	I don`t know:	yes:	no:
	1x		8x
* complains to your parents!	I don`t know:	yes:	no:

14. How long does it take to "get rid" of a red card?

5x	2x	1x	1x
1 lesson:	2 lessons:	3 lessons:	4 lessons:

15. Your parents have heard about the red card system?

	5x	4x
I don`t know:	yes:	no:

16. An advertising slogan for the system! What would be a good slogan?

(See appendix continued!)

17. Should teachers be given red cards too?

8x	1x	
yes:	no:	I don`t know:

Open-ended comments on the red card system (see appendix continued!)

Appendix

Question 16 of the Questionnaire:
Suggestions for advertising slogans for the system.

o   Die Rote Karte ist wie ein warmes Herz. Also kaufen sie eine, und werden sie glücklich!

o   Rote cards bringen unglug.

o   Nicht verkaufen

o   Rote karten Himmelstern ferkaufen Karten gern.

o   Ich glaube die Lehrer kaufen die Karten nicht.
Sie machen den Untericht anders.

o   Rote karte bringen uns zum schweigen.

o   Rote karten sind unglück.

o   Rote karten sind Ungluck

Appendix

Open-ended comments made by pupils on the red card system

o   Ich finde es sehr gut. Machen sie so weiter.

o   Herr Lehrer mach weiter so

o   Mach weiter

o   (no comment made)

o   Herr Lehrer mach weiter

o   Herr Lehrer es ist ein scheiß die Karten sollen weg(gehen). Es hat keinen sinn, jeder tut nur blöd mit den Karten.

o   Herr Lehrer es ist zum Kotzen und es bringt nichts.
Aufhören

o   Die Karten ist ein Scheiß und es ist zu kotzen. Das können sie vergessen.

o   Die Katen ist ein Scheiß und es ist zur kotzen.