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## The Rules

When you come to the classroom as a teacher for the first time, you suddenly find yourself on the other side of “the rules.” As a student, perhaps you attempted to find the loopholes and the exceptions. As a teacher, you are seeking those same loopholes and exceptions, but for a different reason.

Democracy in the classroom is tricky business, and power issues are always touchy. But when you’re new, and perhaps not even sure of what the rules are, as well as why you should enforce them, struggling with power and control can be almost paralyzing. Trying to find the balance between democracy and fascism, as this issue’s author, Tom Pamperin, describes it, can be nearly impossible, if such a balance is even what we should be striking at all.

# New Voices

## All Right, Then, I'll Go to Hell

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Each semester the lunch-duty teachers gather so the assistant principals can explain the purpose of lunch duty. I wasn’t looking forward to the meeting. I had been working on lesson plans for *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, searching for a way to help students understand Huck’s struggle between the demands of his conscience and the demands of society. I was ready to be critical of rules.

To start the meeting, one of the assistant principals introduced a teacher who had done lunch duty the year before. I won’t repeat the term she actually used in her introduction, but it was prefaced with the adjectives *big* and *bad* and made clever use of alliteration. “And I don’t think she minds being introduced that way,” she told us. It turns out that the principals wanted us all to be big, bad lunchroom supervisors and had brought Helen in to show us how to do it.

Helen seemed proud of her title. “When kids see me coming,” she said, “they stop what they’re doing because they know I

won’t put up with anything.” Just from looking at her you could see why. She has a small, round head atop a big, round body and looks like she hasn’t smiled since sometime in 1968. Everyone seemed to dig what she was saying, though. There was a general round of nodding and *that’s rights* as they all savored the idea of being big, bad lunchroom supervisors together.

After everyone finished congratulating themselves on their big badness, the other assistant principal started to spell out the lunchroom rules. For one thing, we were supposed to quash the students’ habit of taking food to the Commons (a front entryway with a few benches and windows overlooking the school’s front lawn, nowhere near the cafeteria) and eating it there. Everyone was sick and tired of the mess students always left behind. It made a bad impression to have trash everywhere. Just try getting kids to clean up after themselves these days, a teacher said. Once I had seen this teacher toss a cigarette butt out the window of his car at a stoplight, and I wondered when he had gone back to clean up after himself. But I didn’t ask.

Couldn’t we just stop students from using the Commons at all, someone suggested. Everyone agreed. They started talking about how things would be so

much easier that way. Banning students from the Commons would solve all the problems. I said it didn't sound like much of a Commons to me if no one was allowed to use it, and everyone's eyes swiveled my way. I could see what a shock it was for one of their own to oppose the idea. But then one of the principals agreed with me and none of the other teachers could do anything about that.

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But *something* has to be done, someone said, the Commons is right by the front door and it's the first thing visitors see, important visitors such as mayors and school board members, and did we want their first impression to be a bunch of kids goofing off or just hanging around? No, we didn't want that. And another thing, someone else said, kids always want to play hacky sack in the Commons even though it's against the rules. And when we tell them to stop playing hacky sack inside, they just go outside and keep right on playing hacky sack! Right outside on the front lawn! What's more, they sometimes even play football or Frisbee, right there where everyone can see them!

I wondered if they wanted visitors to see the kids hanging out at Smokers' Hill across the street instead. Maybe we could ask the smokers to smoke on the front lawn and have the kids with hacky

sacks and footballs and Frisbees move over to Smokers' Hill. But I didn't ask.

Since the Commons apparently was so fraught with impudent behavior, the principals started talking about how maybe we could take one more teacher out of a study hall to be a full-time Commons watcher. Or maybe hire another staff person whose sole duty would be to stand in the Commons and make sure no one left any wrappers on the floor or did anything they weren't supposed to do. I decided to give up and just keep nodding my head until the meeting was over.

Next, the principals wanted to be sure we all understood that when we were watching the Commons, *under no circumstances* were we to allow students to walk down the center hall that connected the Commons to the back entryway. Students could spend lunch time at the back entryway, and they could spend lunch time in the Commons, but it was verboten to start at the back entryway and move to the Commons, or vice

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versa. Anyone who wanted a transfer had to leave the building entirely, walk all the way around the block outside, and come in at the other side of the building.

I couldn't help it; I spoke up again. I'm sure there's a good reason for this rule, and I'm just not think-

ing of it, I said, but could someone tell me why kids can't just walk down the center hall to get from the back entryway to the Commons? I feel kind of dumb when students ask, "Can I walk down the hall?" and I say no, and they ask, "Why not?" and I can never think of anything to tell them.

This made the first principal angry. You shouldn't be answering those questions, she said. That is not your job. Don't think you have to bend over backwards to meet every single request from every single student and give them an inch and they'll take a mile and if you let one of them do it then everyone will want to do it and we can't have students just walking down the hall. *Ordnung ist alles.* You shouldn't have to make a case-by-case judgment about who has a good reason to walk down the hall and who doesn't, she said. The danger of precedent-setting behavior such as letting a student walk down the central hall—well, you can just imagine. Don't invite trouble for yourself. It's not your job to let students do whatever they want. And suddenly everyone at the meeting seemed to be worried that I might decide to spend my time thinking about rules instead of enforcing them, and they all spoke up to let me know what a bad idea that was. The rules are there for a reason, everyone said, just enforce them. But somehow no one got around to telling me what the reason was.

I wondered why my question deserved a lecture instead of an answer. I wanted to ask why everyone felt so threatened. If our control is so precarious that a few students walking the halls would erode it completely, we're already done for.

But we are all like that sometimes. We want control, and we think that rules will give it to us. I've seen some teachers roaming the halls like cops, checking hall passes and interrogating students.

These teachers usually want you to join their crusade. Once one of them pulled me aside, and with a serious look on his face he asked if I let students wear hats in my classroom. Our school does have a rule against wearing hats or coats inside. It's a rule that no one seems to know the real reason for—maybe gangs, maybe something else. I never paid much attention to it, frankly. I tend not to notice hats.

But this other teacher wanted to know if I let students wear hats. Apparently he was concerned about the laxity of my hat discipline and wanted me to understand how important it all was. He just happened to walk by once and saw a student wearing a hat in my room, he said. I didn't let students wear hats, did I?

Not on purpose, I said.

## Getting Away with Something

I think the biggest fear we have is that students might at any moment be *getting away with something* and we'll look stupid because we didn't catch them. At the lunch-duty meeting, everyone wants the rules spelled out precisely, so they can nail the kids who are trying to get away with whatever it is that they're not supposed to be doing. But reality intrudes, and it isn't easy to pin the principals down to a hard-and-fast rule. Can students take food out of the cafeteria? No. Clearly not. Food stays in the cafeteria. What

about drinks? Yes, drinks are OK. They can take drinks out.

Someone asks, but won't students leave the empty bottles lying around in the halls? Isn't that part of what we're trying to do here, prevent littering? New rule. Students can take drinks out of the cafeteria, but only if they plan on drinking them outside. No drinks in the hallways. What about food? No food. But what if students have an unopened bag of chips and they just want to save it for later? Can they take it then? Yes, then it's OK. What if it's an *open* bag of chips, but they aren't going to eat it, they just want to put it in their locker or take it home? Yes, that's OK. As long as they're not actually *eating* the food in the hallways.

No one says anything, but we all know that once students are around the corner we won't know if they are going outside or not, and instead of sneaking a drink or scarfing down a bag of chips they

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could just as easily be starting fires and peppering the trophy cases with bricks.

Someone asks, what about Fridays when they sell popcorn in the hall? Or when they sell cookies? Do we need to tell students who *buy* food in the hall to bring it into the cafeteria to eat? Some students who buy food in the halls aren't even *on* their lunch break, it seems; they're just walking by between classes. New rule. If they buy the food in the hall, they can eat it in the hall. As long as they clean up after themselves.

I think about asking: What if someone takes an unopened bag of chips into the hall and then sells it to someone else, can that person eat those chips in the hall? And what if two students each buy a bag of chips and don't open them and then they go into the hall and sell their chips to each other and eat them, is that OK?

But by then what could have been a five-minute meeting has turned into a forty-five-minute Meeting, so I don't say anything. Eventually everyone runs out of questions and we all wander off.

## Incorporating Subversion

I feel funny being asked to enforce rules when I do such a bad job of following them myself. When I drive, I set my cruise control about seven miles over the speed limit—sixty-two in a fifty-five zone, seventy-two on the interstate. There's no particular reason I want to be going sixty-two instead of fifty-five, but I figure that's what I can get away with, so that's what I do. Sometimes I cross the street when the Don't Walk sign is flashing. Once I put my own lock on a rental locker at the university and kept my stuff there all semester because I didn't see any reason to pay six bucks for a locker that would be empty if I didn't use it. I've been known to sneak a soda into the movies instead of buying it there.

I'd like to give students the same freedom to disregard rules they find unnecessarily intrusive or contrary to common sense. But sometimes guilt overwhelms me—the feeling that I'm somehow not doing my job—and I make a feeble attempt to assert

myself. Not long ago I caught two girls trying to sneak out of the cafeteria. Do you have a pass? I asked. We're in TV Prod, they said. There is an unspoken agreement that TV Prod students are free to roam the halls while working on the week's show, and I had no doubt that this is what the girls were up to. But the first rule of lunch duty is, never let students leave the cafeteria without a pass.

They saw me hesitate, caught between duty and logic. I'm sure it showed: my expression, my stance, everything about me screamed uncertainty. Finally one of the girls took pity on me and offered to go get a written pass, an offer I gratefully accepted. Crisis averted.

The next day I waved them past my checkpoint, having already established that I was the one in control. Go ahead, I told them. But just a few steps past me, Helen—the model of big badness herself—caught them. It wasn't even her shift. Where's your pass? Helen demanded. The girls tried to convince her that they could get a pass anytime, couldn't they just go, why do you have to be so difficult? If you can get a pass anytime, Helen said, then next time get one. And she chased them back to the cafeteria. Along the way she nodded to me politely, no doubt thinking I was grateful to her for backing me up.

I wasn't grateful. If I weren't afraid of getting caught not doing my job, I'd probably never stop anybody. I'd just wave and chat with them a bit and generally treat them the way I think people ought to be treated. But that's not how the system is set up. Somehow we think we can push democracy in the classroom and fascism

in the halls. Does this make sense to anyone? How can I justify teaching Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" if I'm writing up people in the hallways for eating or wearing hats or playing hacky sack? If it's true that government is best when it governs least, we've got a long way to go.

In my classroom, I struggle toward imperfect solutions. I'd like to have as few rules as possible, I tell students. None, ideally. You

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can see the excitement of endless possibilities run through the room. A teacher who doesn't want rules! But it doesn't happen. Someone has to be in charge, and, let's face it, that's me. Just today, two weeks from the end of the year, I kicked a student out of my class—permanently—with our four-strikes-and-you're-out rule. "Reason for disciplinary referral?" the form asks. The real answer—he's a rude, attention-grabbing, arrogant distraction—won't do; too long, too unprofessional. I write "insubordination" instead.

Insubordination? Did I really write that? I glance up at the Edward Abbey quotation pinned to the bulletin board above my desk: "It is not the writer's task to answer questions, but to question answers. To be impertinent, insolent, and, if necessary, subversive."

**Teaching Responsibility?**

Maybe it's ourselves that we are afraid of, not students. It could be

that none of us would stop students in the hall except for the fear of what other teachers would say.

Sometimes I think teachers are saying those things about me: Mr. Pamperin, he's really something. Lets his kids wear hats. Can't stop students from leaving the cafeteria. Doesn't have much control over them at all. But who knows? Maybe they're not saying anything. Maybe they're too worried about what people are saying about them—which might be why they check hall passes and chase students down to ask them to take off their hats.

So I think back to Huck, caught in essentially the same trap. Maybe he had the answer. Maybe all it would take is for a single teacher to tear up the letter and say, All right, then, I'll go to hell, and everyone would cluster around and say, Man, am I glad you did that. I always thought some of these rules were stupid. I wouldn't put up with them myself. If I needed permission to use the bathroom? Get real. Or if I got detention for being half a minute late, or for wearing a hat in the hall? Come on.

So why do we insist on treating students that way? Where is the balance between order and oppression? We do all we can to maintain strict control—rules, bells, hall passes, seating charts, detentions—instead of teaching responsibility. Is that really the system we want? Let's not forget that it hasn't been that long since we were the ones sneaking around without passes, wearing hats, and playing hacky sack.

**There Was a Rule**

Just last week at the local university, I accidentally walked into a computer lab in the middle of a

class. All right, it wasn't even by accident. I saw the "class in session" sign on the door, but I needed to use a computer. There were only about seven or eight people in the class, so I walked in and sat down in the back row and started typing. The professor came up to me and asked if I knew there was a class going on. I said,

I'm not in the way, am I? This is a class, he explained. But I just want to sit here and use a computer, I said. I won't be in your way. He stopped and looked at me. I could tell he was trying to think of some reason I shouldn't be there, but he couldn't come up with anything—it was exactly how I must have looked to the TV

Prod girls. There was a *rule*, but he couldn't think of any reason to enforce it. I knew how he felt.

#### Note

The author would like to thank his wife, Cathy Statz, for paying all the bills for two years while he returned to school to get his English teaching certification.

## English Education Programs Meet NCATE and NCTE Teacher Preparation Guidelines

The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) has adopted the NCTE guidelines, now called program standards, for undergraduate programs for teacher education in English Language Arts for middle/junior and senior high schools. These program standards were derived from NCTE's *Guidelines for the Preparation of Teachers of English Language Arts*. Institutions seeking NCATE accreditation are required to submit program review documents showing how their programs meet the NCTE program standards. The Council's program review process is carried out by over 100 reviewers. All are members of NCTE and CEE (Conference on English Education) who have attended program review training workshops. The NCTE review program is directed by Charles Duke, Appalachian State University, with Sandra E. Gibbs at NCTE headquarters. Since our last listing, 29 institutions have submitted program review documents that show their English education programs to be nationally recognized by the NCTE/NCATE Program Standards. Institutions that are "nationally recognized" by NCTE will be listed on our Web site, which will be updated periodically. Go to: <http://www.ncte.org/prog/ncate/>.

For more information on NCTE's participation in the program review process write to Sandra E. Gibbs, Senior Program Officer, NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, Illinois 61801-1096.

## African American Read-In Scheduled for February, Black History Month

On Sunday and Monday, February 4 and 5, 2007, NCTE will join the NCTE Black Caucus in sponsoring the eighteenth national African American Read-In Chain. This year's goal is to have at least one million Americans across the nation reading works by African American writers on Sunday, February 4. Monday, February 5, is the date designated for read-ins in schools. The event is an opportunity for schools, libraries, community organizations, businesses, and interested citizens to make literacy a significant part of Black History Month by hosting and coordinating read-ins. These activities may range from bringing together family and friends to share a book to staging public readings and media presentations featuring African American writers.

For further information, go to the NCTE Web site at <http://www.ncte.org/prog/readin/107901.htm>. Contacts: Sandra E. Gibbs, NCTE Coordinator, Senior Program Officer, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1096; or Jerrie C. Scott, National Coordinator, African American Read-In, College of Education, ICL-320-C Ball Hall, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN 38152.