

ASK THE TEACHER: KEEPING CONTROL IN THE THEATER

-or-

How to Survive a School Show with Your Sanity Intact

Roger Keen
School Show Lecturer
Griffith Observatory
2800 East Observatory Road
Los Angeles, California 90027

What's that you say, Bunky? Are you about to give a planetarium show to a house full of rambunctious school children? Does the thought make you quiver and shake? Does it make beads of perspiration appear on your upper lip and furrowed brow? Well relax; although you aren't alone, the good news is that the remedy is remarkably simple.

The school show is perhaps the most universal of the bread and butter elements to a planetarium's agenda. The service that we provide to the educational community is in itself one of the best arguments for our existence. But the sad fact is that many a lecturer will shy away from giving such shows for fear of losing control of the crowd of schoolchildren. This fear is understandable. Control is easily lost. Without control no learning can take place and there is no point in trying to continue the show once it is gone. However, as one who is a credentialed teacher, and proud of it, I have learned that the control techniques that I have been taught to use in the classroom will work in the planetarium theater as well. This should come as no surprise, because the planetarium theater is a classroom. As a result, if you use the tricks of the teaching trade the children will immediately recognize what you are doing, view you as a teacher, and respond. Keeping that in mind, let's explore some of the things you can do.

Rule #1: Establish rapport and ground rules early.

It is okay to be a good guy, but you should let the children know right from the beginning that you have expectations. Children need to know what standard of behavior is expected of them, and they actually want limits set. Do this as soon as possible, right at the beginning of the presentation. It is important for them to know from the start that this is not going to be just a movie.

Rule #2: Be consistent.

If you send out mixed signals it will lead to confusion. This does not mean that there must be only one side to your stage personality. For example, a good approach is to be fun but firm at the same time. Once you pick a role, however, you should stick to it.

Rule #3: The children will test you early.

While children want limits set, they will find out right from the start if what you *say* you expect is in fact what you expect. So be ready for them when they test you. Whether or not you let them get away with unacceptable behavior in the beginning will set the tone and limits for the rest of the show.

Rule #4: Be firm, but keep the atmosphere positive.

Praise can work wonders, so don't hesitate to reward good behavior verbally when you see it. If they were exceptionally well behaved as they were being seated, by all means say so in your introduction! Then it becomes easier to give a positive spin to your stated expectations. When they stray, firmly let them know it, but avoid being negative whenever possible. Children will respond much better to positive statements than negative ones. Don't we all?

Rule #5: Learn the lingo teachers use to keep control of their classes.

This is fairly universal, though the exact wording may have some local variations. Experienced teachers do it so automatically that they may not think about it, but in the beginning it requires active thought. Ask around, and you will find it goes something like this:

"I'm going to wait for everyone (to do something)..." (pause)

"I like the way that (someone is behaving well)..." (pause)

"Thank you if you are (conforming to expectations)..." (pause)

"I need everyone to (meet expectations)..." (pause)

For example, you might say, "I like the way that most of you are paying attention; but for everyone to hear me I need everybody to pay attention, so I'm going to wait..." The key is to reestablish your expectation and wait for them to do it. The children (and the teachers) know these magic words and will probably respond to these signals. So talk to your local teachers and ask what *they* do.

Rule #6: Involve the children as much as possible.

An interactive style is not only educationally sound but will usually help keep control at the same time. Ask questions and encourage responses. Letting the children say the answers out loud and having them repeat key words helps keep their minds focused on the task of learning, rather than on making mischief. More often than not interaction is an excellent approach. On occasion, however, you may get individuals or groups that use such opportunities as an excuse to make noise. If this should happen it may be better not to use the interactive approach. Over time you should develop a feel for when it is useful and when it will be better to drop it.

Rule #7: Use verbal cues.

You can set the stage to avoid troublesome spots in advance. For example, in our shows we initially drop the sky to the brightness of the light-polluted city, then drop it all the way to the glorious blackness that we would see from the country, far from the city. If one is not careful, one could get an uproar of delight that can be difficult to control, so I take the precaution of telling the children that one of the things that makes the country at night so special is how quiet it is. Then, as I slowly drop the sky glow, I ask them to see if we can continue to hear a pin drop when we get there. They usually get the hint!

Rule #8: Try using voice control techniques.

Voice control tricks are very important. When things get noisy your instincts may tell you to raise your voice to be heard better, but often you will find that, quite to the contrary, by lowering your voice you will get better results. Sometimes “loud as a whisper” is the case, for the children must quiet down to hear you. At the same time that I am dropping the house lights I lower my voice as we head to the quiet of the country, so they will have to stay quiet to continue to hear me. In any event, never ever scream at them! Screaming is worse than useless. Also, remember that your tone of voice can make or break a presentation. If you sound bored you will be boring. The children will find you to be much more interesting if you aren’t afraid to show them that you are excited by a concept. Greater interest will lead to better behavior, so go ahead and ham it up-they’ll love it!

Rule #9: If things get out of hand, indicate that it may be necessary to “return to the city” (i.e., bring up the house lights).

If that does not work, do it and indicate to the chaperones that the children’s behavior is unacceptable and the show will not continue until they have settled their groups down. This is something that should be used only as a last resort, and if you have been following these suggestions should in fact only rarely need to be done, if ever. I personally have yet to have to do this, but if time is of the essence it may be the fastest way to accomplish your goal. In any event it should be done sparingly, for it can lose its punch if overused – if you aren’t careful the children may turn it into a game, in which case you might as well all go home.

Rule #10: You are the boss.

The bottom line is that you are their teacher while they are in your planetarium theater. When you act like one, they will respond accordingly. Control is something you take, so don’t wait to be given it! Take control and have a good show!

Suggestions for Further Reading

These suggestions involve the ten most common control rules I personally use when presenting school shows. In actuality, there are many more that are used by teachers in the classroom, and while many of them are inappropriate outside a school setting you may find some of them useful in the planetarium theater. There are many textbooks that cover the subject of classroom control, often from different perspectives. Three are listed here:

Gage, N.L., and Berliner, David C. (1988): *Educational Psychology* (Fourth Edition). Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, MA.

Jones, Vernon F., and Jones, Louise S. (1990): *Comprehensive Classroom Management: Motivating and Managing Students* (Third Edition). Allyn and Bacon, Needham Heights, MA.

Lewis, Rena B.; and Doorlag, Donald H. (1991): *Teaching Special Students in the Mainstream* (Third Edition), Chapter 5 pp. 102-135. Merrill Pub. Co., New York, NY.