

Lessons from an Attention-Seeking Sneezing Student

By [David Ginsburg](#) on January 22, 2011 6:23 PM

James was a model student--courteous, on time, took notes, and did his homework. He also sneezed a lot. Never a series of sneezes, but rather one prolonged explosion about every five minutes of instruction, followed by a loud, deliberate "Oh sorry, excuse me." Between the sneezing and apologies, James was as distracting as your classic class clown. No, his sneezing didn't call for disciplinary action, but the damage was done in that every time James sneezed, I interrupted class to look at him. Even worse, his classmates often confronted him: "Man, you sound like a volcano. Stay home, dude, before you get us all sick!"

Finally, one day I kept an eye--and ear--on James as students were working in small groups. No sneezes. I monitored James a few more days and confirmed that he only sneezed during whole-group instruction. I then mentioned James' sneezing to one of his other teachers, who gave me a funny look and said, "If it weren't for James, no one would answer any of my questions." That's when it hit me: unlike my colleague, who only called on hand-raisers (James was one of those "ooh, ooh, call on me" kids), I went with a hands down, cold call approach where I called on all students equally. And so, whereas my colleague was indulging James, I was stifling him. His "sneezing" was, in effect, an allergic reaction to lack of attention, while his interaction with classmates during group work was instant antihistamine.

This revelation about James gave rise to an assumption I've made ever since: *every* action by *every* student at *every* moment is aimed at getting attention--from teachers and/or peers. Never mind whether this assumption is valid, since it's the implication of it that matters more than its validity. In particular, since our attention can only be one place at a time, we need to direct it to the right places at the right times in the right ways--a premise being that we reinforce an action when we acknowledge it, and discourage it when we ignore it.

A further implication for the classroom is that **we must focus our attention on constructive behavior to the exclusion of disruptive behavior**, not the other way around. Easier said than done at times, but more often than not we have a choice. In James' case, for example, once I figured out what was going on, I resolved to ignore his sneezing and keep on teaching. His classmates soon followed my lead, and within a week or two the sneezing subsided.

I'll be sharing in future posts a few strategies--inspired by James and other students--for giving or *not* giving students attention in ways that best serve them and the class as a whole. Until then, gesundheit!

