Competency-Based Education
Folio Series

Element VIIb
DEMONSTRATING WITHITNESS

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Element VIIb
DEMONSTRATING WITHITNESS
IN A COMPETENCY-BASED CLASSROOM

The term *withitness* might initially sound like educational jargon, particularly to noneducators. Actually, it was introduced by Jacob Kounin in 1977 in his book *Discipline and Group Management in Classrooms*. Since then, it has been used by teachers and administrators to refer to a heightened awareness of what is occurring in the classroom and what could occur in the classroom. Perhaps the most graphic description of withitness is *having eyes in the back of your head.*

Certainly, withitness is an important skill in a traditional classroom that is likely foundational to maintaining an orderly environment. It is even more important in a CBE classroom. Although students in a traditional classroom are typically engaged in the same activity at any given point in time, in a CBE classroom, individual and small groups of students might be working on very different activities. This degree of variation creates an environment that makes it more difficult to discern if students are actually engaged in activities that are enhancing their learning.

Teachers who demonstrate withitness have developed a number of skills including heightened awareness, the ability to notice behaviors or interactions that might disrupt the learning environment, skill in reacting to behaviors in productive ways, and the ability to interact with students in ways that calm the waters, address underlying issues, and divert energy to productive behaviors.

What Does It Look Like When You Are Demonstrating Withitness?

When demonstrating withitness, teachers should be involved in activities like the following:

- Attending to potential problems before they occur
- Proactively taking preemptive action to avoid disruptions in the classroom
- Occupying all quadrants of the classroom and making regular eye contact with each student
- Using a series of graduated actions to address behavior issues

Teachers also should be able to describe the primary strategies they employ when demonstrating withitness.

In addition to teachers engaging in specific behaviors, demonstrating withitness involves students engaging in behaviors like the following:

- Being aware of the fact that the teacher is noticing their behavior
- Extinguishing potentially disruptive behaviors quickly and efficiently

When asked, students also:
- Describe the teacher as aware of what is going on in the classroom

What You Should Understand and Be Able To Do

Demonstrating withitness involves using the following strategies and actions:

- Be proactive
- Be sensitive to student differences and tendencies
- Occupy the whole room physically and visually
- Notice potential problems
- Use a series of graduated actions

STRATEGIES

The strategies highlighted in this section cover some of the key concepts and skills teachers should understand and be able to use to effectively demonstrate withitness in a CBE classroom.

Be Proactive

Teachers, like all of us, are not superhuman. However, the best of teachers try to quell problems between individual students, help students stay engaged in learning, and make the learning environment welcoming, safe, and inspiring and one that reflects a commitment to meet the varying needs of individual students. Nonetheless, despite teachers' best efforts, behavioral issues, distractions, conflicts, and student's personal concerns arise in any classroom. Yet, with good planning and a proactive mindset, coupled with specific proactive steps, many of the situations that might arise can be anticipated.

Action steps teachers might take to be proactive:

- Note specific students who might have trouble staying focused or behaving appropriately in class and talk with them outside of class.
- Consider and create a plan for addressing scenarios that are likely to arise, such as unproductive interactions and disruptions between students.
- Get to know individual students - their interests, concerns, and attitudes toward learning.
- Talk privately with students about behaviors, issues, concerns, and expectations.
- Establish an agreed-upon signal between teacher and student when student behavior arises that isn't productive (e.g., leave a note on the student's desk, tap twice gently on the student's desktop)
- Maintain awareness of incidents outside the class, schoolwide, or in the community that might influence student behavior

Exhibit 1 describes how these behaviors might manifest in the classroom.

Exhibit 1. Being Proactive in a CBE Classroom

Mrs. Kumar is planning a series of lessons that she thinks may challenge some students in terms of their ability to stay focused. She can think of three students in particular who struggle during lessons that have a fair amount of declarative – or informational – knowledge about individuals, dates, and timelines. All three students, who tend to sit together at the back of the class, generally do well academically but recently have been laughing and talking during class. She meets with the three students together and talks with them about what she has observed. She lets them know that their behavior has been distracting and she expects them to do better. The three admit that their behavior hasn't been the best. One student says he's been bored; another says she doesn't understand some of content but hasn't been motivated enough to ask questions; the third just nods his head in agreement while the second student is speaking.

Mrs. Kumar decides to assign specific roles to these three students for the duration of the upcoming lessons. Two students will be resources for students who struggle with the content. To do this, they will need to prepare in more depth than they might otherwise. She asks the third student to take detailed notes along with questions that come to mind during each lesson and questions that other students ask. She arranges to meet with the three students after each lesson to see what they have learned, both about the content and about their participation in class.

Be Sensitive to Student Differences and Tendencies

Some students might have tendencies that make it more difficult for them to follow specific rules and procedures. Instead of thinking of students with these tendencies as disobedient, it is more accurate to realize that they have specific needs that, when met, help them feel accepted and valued. To this end, it is useful for teachers to learn to recognize the specific types of students who might need specific types of support. There are five types of students with tendencies and needed support that teachers should be aware of: (1) passive, (2) aggressive, (3) perfectionists, (4) socially inept, and (5) students with attention difficulties.

Passive students tend to shy away from social interactions and need to know they are in a safe and supportive environment. *Aggressive students* tend to lash out unexpectedly at others. They need feedback when inappropriate behavior occurs, but this feedback should be balanced with providing opportunities for them to be viewed as responsible and valued members of the class. Students who are *perfectionists* tend to hold themselves to standards that are so high as to be unattainable. They need assurance that their work can be useful and valued even if it contains mistakes or inaccuracies. *Socially inept students* tend to be unaware of the fact that they may be breaking social norms when interacting with others. They should be provided with gentle instruction about social rules and help in following these rules. *Students with attention difficulties* tend to be easily distracted. They need to be provided with cues when they are distracted and support in how to stay engaged.

Exhibit 2 summarizes the tendencies of these five types of students and actions a teacher might take to support them.

Exhibit 2. Types of Students, Tendencies, &s Suggested Teacher Actions (continued next page)

Type of Student	Common Tendencies	Teacher Actions
Passive	Avoids interacting for fear of criticism, ridicule, giving a wrong answer, or feeling dominated by the teacher or by more vocal students	Celebrate successes. Give neutral but appreciative feedback, whether responses are correct or incorrect. Minimize public criticism.
Aggressive	Interrupts during class, behaves or speaks in rude or disrespectful ways, may try to intimidate other students, may experience a lack of self-confidence or success	Connect one on one with the student. Respond consistently and appropriately to unproductive behavior. Avoid power struggles. Be firm but gentle. Encourage extracurricular activities. Give student additional responsibilities so he or she can experience praise for work well done. Help the student take responsibility for his or her behavior.
Perfectionist	Holds himself or herself to unnecessarily high standards or unrealistic standards, has a fear of failing or being embarrassed	Help the student set realistic expectations while not dampening enthusiasm for success or the desire to reach "stretch" goals. Encourage intellectual curiosity and risk taking. Stress that mistakes are opportunities to learn. Set time limits for assignments and answers. Express acceptance for answers, right or wrong.

Type of Student	Common Tendencies	Teacher Actions
Socially inept	Unaware of subtle social cues, has few or no friends, anxious when interacting with others, may feel lonely and isolated, may not see how his or her actions and reactions affect others, vulnerable to bullying	Let the student know that he or she is valued. Take time to get to know the student better. Meet with the student privately and make suggestions about social cues the student may be unaware of that may affect interactions. Model appropriate behavior with other students.
Attention difficulties	Easily distracted, may be difficult to engage or re-engage in tasks, may turn in late or incomplete work, has difficulty listening, remembering, and organizing	Talk with family or other adults about possible student testing. Create an individualized learning plan. Agree on signals you will provide to student when student appears distracted or off-task. Teach basic concentration, study, and thinking skills. Identify a tutor or peer advisor for the student.

Exhibit 3 describes how a teacher might use these distinctions in the classroom.

Exhibit 3. Interacting with Different Types of Students in a CBE Classroom

Mr. Rosa's students vary a great deal, not only in terms of their learning styles, interests, and degrees of academic success with different topics, but also their attitudes toward peers and toward themselves. To help all students succeed, Mr. Rosa has identified action steps and behaviors of note relative to each student, points he modifies as the year goes on.

For instance, shortly after the beginning of the school year, he observes that one of his students, Priscilla, is high achieving but also quite critical of herself. When she gives an incorrect answer or misses even a very small number of items on a long assessment, she becomes upset and anxious. He knows that all students, to one degree or another, need to have a healthier perspective about so-called failures.

Mr. Rosa stresses to the class that although it is healthy to set stretch goals, it is also important to learn from mistakes and to see such mistakes or "failures" as opportunities to learn. Throughout the school year, he shares stories of successful people who failed who later went on to achieve great things, largely due to what they learned as a result of failing.

During classroom discussion and questioning sequences, he also makes sure to acknowledge and thank each student for his or her reply, whether the student's reply is accurate or inaccurate. He also points out that it is a balance all people need to learn – to strive to be better and do better yet have compassion for oneself when a goal is not attained and to think about what there is to learn from any challenging situation.

Occupy the Whole Room Physically and Visually

Student interaction, learning, and engagement occur in every area of the classroom, whether during whole-class instruction, small-group work, individual seatwork, or work in learning centers. Teachers who demonstrate withitness have developed strategies that help them maintain awareness of activities and behaviors occurring in all areas of the classroom. In this way, the teacher is said to "occupy" the whole room physically and visually. Specifically, this means that teachers:

- Physically move to different areas of the classroom
- Visually scan the classroom while teaching and interacting to look for signs of potential problems and quickly assess student behavior and engagement levels
- Make eye contact with individual students on a regular basis to convey awareness of each student in the classroom

To more deliberately plan how they will occupy the whole room, teachers might use a planning guide. Exhibit 4 shows how one teacher might use such a guide.

Exhibit 4. Planning Guide to Occupy the Entire Classroom Physically and Visually

Mrs. Lewis is planning a series of lessons involving whole-class instruction, small-group work, and individual seatwork. To ensure that she attends to student questions, engagement, and focus as well as distracting behaviors or issues that arise, Mrs. Lewis makes the following plan:

Class: *Geography*

Whole-class instruction: *I will spend a few minutes in each quadrant of the room, moving from section to section, while making eye contact with individual students as I do so, to communicate that their participation is valued and to look for any questions that arise.*

Small-group work: *I will walk around the room, pausing in places where I can observe two or more groups and respond to issues or questions, while also maintaining awareness of the whole room. I may join a group briefly as appropriate. If I do, I will periodically scan the rest of the room, noting specific students, so I don't lose sight of other behaviors or issues that may need my attention.*

Individual seatwork: *I will walk around the room, listen and look for questions or concerns that may arise, and make eye contact with individual students to let them know I am aware of them and available for assistance if needed.*

I plan to make eye contact with, move closer to, and/or pay particular attention to the following students (or groups of students):
Robby (shy – questions?)   Francois (focus?)   Helen and Thuy (talking)

Questions I will ask myself during instruction:
- Am I in a place where I can make eye contact with all students?
- If a student or students are disruptive or distracted or seem restless, how might I move physically closer without interrupting the lesson or distracting other students?
- Am I physically moving between groups or to different areas of the classroom to ensure that students are on task?
- Have I occupied each area of the classroom?
- Am I making eye contact with students to let them know I am aware of them?

Notice Potential Problems

As teachers hone their skills in maintaining awareness of interactions, behaviors, and levels of engagement throughout the classroom, they become more skilled in identifying and preemptively addressing situations that could develop into classroom disruptions. The observations teachers make cannot always be interpreted in a black or white way. For instance, students speaking softly while huddled close together may mean that students are highly engaged in a topic; these behaviors might also signal that students are off task. Exhibit 5 lists some of the more common signs of potential problems or distractions and ways teachers might react.

Exhibit 5. Sample Indicators of Potential Problems and Suggested Teacher Actions

Problem	Suggested Teacher Actions
Disengaged student(s)	Move physically closer to, make eye contact with, or verbally cue the student(s) to stay on task. If the disengagement is due to an outside distraction, try to remove or minimize the distraction (e.g., close the classroom door, close window blinds, wait a few seconds until loud sounds from the hall subside).
Students talking together during instruction	Move physically closer to or verbally call on one or more students. If the behavior continues, consider directly asking the students to stay on task. Separate students physically if needed.
Students making consistent eye contact across the room while appearing to not be paying attention	Stand between the students making eye contact or call on one or more of the students to demonstrate that you are aware they are disengaged.
Students whispering, giggling, or making unusual noises when the teacher's back is turned	Turn and face the class and directly ask students what's going on. If the behavior continues, take a brief class break or talk with specific students one on one.
Students all looking toward one area of the classroom	Move to the area of the room to determine what may be distracting students. Ask students what is going on.
Students not paying attention during a video	Pause the video and ask a series of questions to re-engage students in the topic. Provide a worksheet for students to complete while watching the video.
Students not focusing during small-group work	Move closer to the small group (or join the group) and ask questions about the topic. If students seem unable to answer, let the group know that you will return to check again.

Exhibit 6 describes what a teacher might do when he or she becomes aware of potential problems.

Exhibit 6. Responding to Problems in a CBE Classroom

During Mr. Sagan's class, he notices three students staring off into space. As he walks closer to where they are seated, all three students look down and begin to write in their notebooks. Mr. Sagan pauses, smiles, and turns to walk to a different area of the room. As he does, he hears the sound of small objects hitting the floor while students are laughing. Mr. Sagan turns back, moves closer to the area of the sounds, and sees numerous small, white wads of paper on the floor. The same three students – plus another student – are smiling, looking down at their desks, and trying not to laugh. Mr. Sagan keeps his voice somewhat low while speaking to the small group of students, "Please stop that behavior and focus on the lesson. Thank you. Or, if you prefer, we will meet after school today." He pauses and makes eye contact with each of the students.

Use a Series of Graduated Actions

Effective teachers have developed a variety of skills for dealing with classroom disruptions that they employ depending on the nature or severity of the situation. These skills might be viewed as a series of graduated actions, ranging, for instance, from pausing during a lesson and creating moments of silence that convey that behavior is distracting to completely interrupting instruction to directly address disruptive behavior. Regardless of the level of action or reaction teachers choose to engage in, it is important to remain calm and respectful.

One way to minimize potential issues is to ensure that students know how teachers may react and the steps that may be taken when issues arise. Teachers might share a draft plan with students and ask for their feedback and questions or simply provide students with a form like that shown in Exhibit 7 and provide time for them to review, ask questions, and sign to signal their understanding.

Exhibit 7. Using a Series of Steps to Address Disruptive Classroom Behaviors

Mr. Colombo and his students created a list of classroom rules and procedures at the beginning of the year. This list is posted on a classroom wall, visible to all. From time to time throughout the year, the class reviews the agreements. Mr. Colombo also has drafted a series of graduated steps he will take if classroom distractions or disruptions occur. To ensure that students understand the process, he provides the following form to all students. He encourages students to share the form with their parents and come to class the next day with any questions they may have.

STEPS I WILL TAKE REGARDING DISRUPTIVE CLASSROOM BEHAVIORS
Please note that these steps are provided as general guidelines only.

1. Make eye contact with the student or students to signal that I am aware of the disruptive behavior or issue.
2. If the disruption or distraction continues, I will move in the direction of the student or students and use nonverbal cues to communicate that the behavior is unacceptable.
3. If the disruption or distraction still continues, I will speak with the student or students and ask them to stop and invite them to engage again in class. I will let students know that their participation is welcomed and valued.
4. If the disruption or distraction still continues, I may stop class, deal directly with the situation, and remind students of the consequences if particular behaviors continue. Further steps, including parent conferences, may occur if needed.

Potential consequences include:
1. Loss of recess time (partial or full)
2. Note home to be signed by parent
3. After-school detention and note home to be signed by parent
4. Parent conference to discuss issues, possible discipline, and plan of action

I understand how Mr. Colombo plans to react to disruptive behavior and distractions. I also understand the potential consequences that may result from ongoing disruptive behavior.

_____   _____
Student Signature   Date

DETERMINE YOUR STATUS & GROWTH REGARDING THIS ELEMENT

To develop teachers' individual skills in demonstrating withitness, each teacher should begin by identifying his or her current level of expertise relative to this strategy by using the scale shown in Exhibit 8.

Exhibit 8. Teacher Self-Evaluation Scale for Demonstrating Withitness in a CBE Classroom

	4 Innovating	3 Applying	2 Developing	1 Beginning	0 Not Using
Demonstrating Withitness	I engage in all behaviors at *the Applying* level. In addition, I identify those students who do not seem to be cognizant of my awareness of classroom behaviors. I design alternate activities and strategies to meet their specific needs, leading to almost all students being cognizant of my awareness of classroom behavior.	I engage in activities to demonstrate withitness, and most students are cognizant of my awareness of classroom behavior.	I engage in activities to demonstrate withitness without making significant errors or omissions. Evidence for this level of performance includes: 1. I preemptively take action to avoid disruptions in the classroom. 2. I occupy the whole room physically and visually.	I engage in activities to demonstrate withitness, but I make significant errors or omissions, such as not picking up on signs that a disruption might occur or not being aware of what students are doing in all quadrants of the room.	I do not engage in activities to demonstrate withitness.

Source: Adapted from Marzano 2011, 2012; Marzano & Toth, 2013.

The self-evaluation scale shown in Exhibit 8 has a straightforward logic to it. At the *not using* level, the teacher is not doing anything to demonstrate withitness. At the *beginning* level, the teacher is trying to demonstrate withitness but is doing so with some significant errors or omissions. At the *developing* level, the teacher is demonstrating withitness and is not making any significant errors or omissions. At this level, however, the teacher's actions are not translating into the majority of students benefiting from the teacher's efforts to demonstrate withitness. This occurs at the *applying* level, where the teacher demonstrates withitness without making significant errors or omissions and at least a majority of students are experiencing the desired effects. At the *innovating* level, the teacher is going

above and beyond the *applying* level by (1) identifying those students who are not experiencing the desired effects of the teachers' efforts to demonstrate withitness and (2) making adaptations to meet their specific needs.

Teachers should start by examining the evidence for the *developing* level, which involves doing certain things and being able to describe certain behaviors they engage in. If teachers do not engage in these behaviors and cannot describe the strategies they use, then they should probably rate themselves at the *not using* level or the *beginning* level. If they are making no attempts at strategies for this element, they should rate themselves at the *not using* level. If they are making attempts at strategies for this element, they should probably rate themselves at the *beginning* level. If teachers meet the criteria for the *developing* level, then they should examine the evidence for the *applying* level. Such evidence focuses on things students are doing and things students can describe. If students are meeting these criteria, then teachers should determine whether they are making adaptations for specific students who are not benefitting from the teachers' efforts to demonstrate withitness. If so, then teachers can score themselves at the *innovating* level.

To further help teachers rate themselves, we offer the guidelines shown in Exhibit 9.

Exhibit 9. Element VIIb: Teacher Guidelines for Self-Evaluation: Demonstrating Withitness in a CBE Classroom

Design Area VII: I create an environment and engage students in activities that provide a sense of comfort, safety, and order.	
Element VIIb Planning Question: What will I do to demonstrate withitness?	
Teacher Evidence for Level 2 (Developing) **I am:** • Attending to potential problems before they occur • Proactively taking preemptive action to avoid disruptions in the classroom • Occupying all quadrants of the classroom and making regular eye contact with each student • Using a series of graduated actions to address behavior issues **When asked, I can:** • Describe the most common strategies I use to maintain withitness	**Student Evidence for Level 3 (Applying) or 4 (Innovating)** **Students are:** • Aware of the fact that I am noticing their behavior • Extinguishing potentially disruptive behaviors quickly and efficiently **When asked, students:** • Describe me as someone who is aware of what is going on in the classroom

Source: Adapted from Marzano 2011, 2012; Marzano & Toth, 2013.

Tracking Progress Over Time

Occasionally score yourself on the strategy you have selected to work on and track your progress.

Strategy: _____

Initial Score: _____

Goal Score: _____ by _____ (date)

Score on Element	a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i	j
4										
3										
2										
1										
0										

Date

a._____   f. _____

b._____   g._____

c._____   h._____

d._____   i. _____

e._____   j._____

Strategy Reflection Log

As you practice your selected strategy, record notes about how you are progressing using the following form.

Date	Notes

Teacher Survey for Demonstrating Withitness

Teachers can use this survey to evaluate themselves at different points in time as part of continuous improvement. Each evaluation is an opportunity to assess progress and then set new personal goals for improvement. The individual teacher using this survey should select the number on the scale of 1–5 that most accurately reflects his or her use of the particular strategy, where 1 = "no, not at all" and 5 = "yes, definitely."

1. I consistently maintain awareness of differing situations arising throughout the classroom and take proactive steps to quell problems and reengage students.

    1   2   3   4   5

2. I use tailored strategies to meet the specific needs of different types of students to help them feel accepted and valued.

    1   2   3   4   5

3. I "occupy" the whole classroom physically and visually by ensuring that I move to different areas of the classroom during learning, visually scan for signs of potential problems, and make eye contact with individual students.

    1   2   3   4   5

4. I use a series of graduated actions when needed to address unproductive behaviors, disengagement, or class disruption.

    1   2   3   4   5

What strategies do you commonly use to demonstrate withitness?

_____

_____

_____

Student Survey for My Teacher's Awareness of the Classroom – Elementary School

1. My teacher moves to different areas of the classroom while we are learning.

   I very much disagree.   I disagree.   I don't agree or disagree.   I agree.   I very much agree.

2. My teacher makes eye contact with me and other students while we are learning.

   I very much disagree.   I disagree.   I don't agree or disagree.   I agree.   I very much agree.

3. My teacher seems to be aware of everything that is going on in the classroom.

   I very much disagree.   I disagree.   I don't agree or disagree.   I agree.   I very much agree.

4. My teacher responds quickly to problems with students.

   I very much disagree.   I disagree.   I don't agree or disagree.   I agree.   I very much agree.

5. My teacher has told me what steps he or she may take if behavior problems occur and the possible consequences of inappropriate behavior.

   I very much disagree.   I disagree.   I don't agree or disagree.   I agree.   I very much agree.

Student Survey for Our Teacher's Awareness of the Classroom – High School

1. Our teacher moves to different areas of the classroom while we are learning.

   I strongly disagree.   I disagree.   I don't agree or disagree.   I agree.   I strongly agree.

2. Our teacher makes eye contact with me and with other students during class.

   I strongly disagree.   I disagree.   I don't agree or disagree.   I agree.   I strongly agree.

3. Our teacher seems to be aware of everything that is going on in the classroom.

   I strongly disagree.   I disagree.   I don't agree or disagree.   I agree.   I strongly agree.

4. Our teacher responds quickly to problems with students.

   I strongly disagree.   I disagree.   I don't agree or disagree.   I agree.   I strongly agree.

5. Our teacher has told us what steps he or she may take if behavior problems occur and the possible consequences of inappropriate behavior.

I strongly disagree.   I disagree.   I don't agree or disagree.   I agree.   I strongly agree.

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