

Addressing Students' Needs: Dealing with Disruptive Behavior in the Classroom¹

Reprinted with permission from Kathleen McKinney, Cross Chair in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning and Professor of Sociology, Illinois State University

Prevention

The best place to start when seeking to develop a positive learning environment, of course, is to try to prevent disruptive behavior in the first place; however, this is only partially under your control. Here are some suggestions:

- Include course and behavior norms and expectations for students and instructors in your syllabi.
- Discuss these norms and expectations on the first day of class. Tell students you expect that they will act appropriately, but that you want to remind students of these norms.
- Share control and responsibility with students in the class by asking them on the first day what the norms for classroom behavior should be, and adding their ideas to your list.
- Draw up a "contract" for classroom behavior and ask students to read and sign it the first week of class (this can include that they agree to attend class, participate, be prepared, etc.).
- Be extra tough on all matters the first day and week to set the "tone." You can always be flexible and nurturing later.

Intervention

If disruptive behaviors occur despite your efforts at prevention, you must act as early/quickly as possible. Otherwise, you can "lose control" of the classroom, frustrate other students, and create a hostile learning environment.

Mild Classroom Interventions

- Walk over to talkative students and conduct class standing right next to them.
- Direct firm, but not derogatory, comments to the disruptive students during class. Ask if they have a comment or question. Ask them to be quiet. Let them know they are being unfair to their peers.
- On a given day when this behavior occurs, change what you are doing. Break students into groups for some work. Call on these and other students to come forward and lead discussion.
- Stop whatever you are doing and wait (as long as it takes) for students to quiet down while you look at the disruptive students. Then begin again.

More Extreme Classroom Interventions

- Spend some time in class discussing the whole situation openly and honestly with all the students. What do they think? Tell them how you feel. Ask how they think things should be handled. You may feel you cannot "waste" class time doing this. But, if class time is disrupted by students and this affects your ability to work, learning is being harmed and the class time is already being wasted.
- Ask the disruptive student(s) to leave the classroom for that class period.
- Consider changing the structure of the whole class. Is it all lecture? Do students need to be more active and involved? Rethink if/how what you do fits the students and the course. Use more diverse techniques to reach the disruptive student(s).

¹ Excerpted from the CIRTL network: <http://www.cirtl.net/node/2552>

Out-of-Class Interventions

- Talk with colleagues in your department (including your chair). How would they handle these situations? What do they see as normative? This gives you ideas for handling the situation and lets your chairperson know what is happening early on, and that you are trying to deal with it.
- Note who the disruptive students are and speak to them after class or ask them to come to your office hours. Explain why/how you find them disruptive, find out why they are acting that way, ask them what they would be comfortable doing. Tell them what you want to do.
- Discuss the disruptive behavior in private outside of class with some of the concerned and non-disruptive students. Ask for their assistance in maintaining a positive classroom environment.
- Inform the student outside of class that their disruptive behavior does not fit your criteria for participation and that their grade will be lowered if it does not stop (this one can be tricky, depending on what your syllabus says and how you handle it).

Balancing Discipline and Student Evaluations

Finally, concern about students' reactions and negative feedback on student evaluations as a result of these types of situations is often an issue for faculty. Overall, these situations will probably not have a major impact on your evaluations. In addition, the fact that you have tried to address these situations and deal with the disruptive students should further reduce any negative effects. Discussing the problem openly with students may also help.

Addressing Students' Needs: Creating a Learning Environment

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Convey the same level of respect and confidence in the abilities of all your students.

Research studies show that many instructors unconsciously base their expectations of student performance on such factors as gender, language proficiency, socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, prior achievement, and appearance (Green, 1989). Research has also shown that an instructor's expectations can become self-fulfilling prophecies: students who sense that more is expected of them tend to outperform students who believe that less is expected of them - regardless of the students' actual abilities (Green, 1989; Pemberton, 1988). Tell all your students that you expect them to work hard in class, that you want them to be challenged by the material, and that you hold high standards for their academic achievement. And then practice what you have said: expect your students to work hard, be challenged, and achieve high standards (Green, 1989; Pemberton, 1988).

Don't try to "protect" any group of students.

Don't refrain from criticizing the performance of individual students in your class on account of their ethnicity or gender. If you attempt to favor or protect a given group of students by demanding less of them, you are likely to produce the opposite effect: such treatment undermines students' self-esteem and their view of their abilities and competence (Hall & Sandler, 1982).

Be evenhanded in how you acknowledge students' good work.

Let students know that their work is meritorious, and praise their accomplishments. But be sure to recognize the achievements of all students.

Recognize the complexity of diversity.

Although what we know about different ethnic groups is uneven, avoid generalizing.

Addressing Students' Needs: Common Disruptive Student Behaviors and Possible Responses

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The following are examples of student behaviors that have the potential to disrupt class or successful learning, along with several possible responses.

Rambling

- Refocus students' attention by restating a relevant point.
- Direct questions to a group that is back on the subject.
- Ask how the topic relates to the current topic being discussed.
- Use visual aids, begin to write on the board, turn on an overhead projector.
- Say: "Would you summarize your main point please?" or "Are you asking...?"

Shyness or Silence

- Change your teaching strategies from group discussion to individual written exercises.
- Give strong positive reinforcement for any contribution.
- Involve the shy student by directly asking him/her a question.
- Make eye contact with the student.
- Appoint the student to be small group leader.

Talkativeness

- Acknowledge the comments.
- Give the student limited time to express his or her viewpoint or feelings, and then move on.
- Make eye contact with another participant, and move toward that person.
- Give the person individual attention during breaks.
- Say: "That's an interesting point. Now let's see what other people think."

Sharp-shooting

- Admit that you do not know the answer and redirect the question to the group or the individual who asked it.
- Acknowledge that this is a joint learning experience.
- Ignore the behavior.

Heckling/Arguing

- Redirect the question to group or supportive individuals.
- Recognize the participant's feelings and move on.
- Acknowledge positive points.
- Say: "I appreciate your comments, but I'd like to hear from others," or "It looks like we disagree."

Grandstanding

- Say: "You are entitled to your opinion, belief or feelings, but now it's time we moved on to the next subject," or "Can you restate that as a question?" or "We'd like to hear more about that if there is time after the presentation."

Overt Hostility/Resistance

- Hostility can be a mask for fear. Reframe hostility as fear to depersonalize it.
- Respond to the fear, not the hostility.
- Remain calm and polite. Keep your temper in check.
- Don't disagree, but build on or around what has been said.
- Move closer to the hostile person; maintain eye contact.
- Always allow the student a face-saving retreat from the confrontation.
- Say: "You seem really angry. Does anyone else feel this way?"
- Allow the individual to solve the problem being addressed. He or she may not be able to offer solutions, and will sometimes undermine his or her own position.
- Talk to the student privately during a break.
- As a last resort, privately ask the individual to leave class for the good of the group.

Griping

- Point out that you can't change the policy.
- Validate the student's point.
- Indicate that you'll discuss the problem with the participant privately.
- Indicate time pressure.

Side Conversations

- Don't embarrass the talkers.
- Ask their opinion on the topic being discussed.
- Ask the talkers if they would like to share their ideas.
- Casually move toward those talking.
- Make eye contact with them.
- Comment on the group (but don't look at them individually).
- Standing near the talkers, ask a nearby participant a question so that the new discussion is near the talkers.
- As a last resort, stop and wait.

Classroom Management of Specific Behaviors

Adapted and modified from Lisa Rodriguez, Ph.D.

<http://www.4faculty.org/includes/108r2.jsp>

Issue	Solution
1. Undermining the instructor's authority	<p>A student might engage in a battle of the wills with the instructor. This student would need to be privately told that their attitude was confrontational and asked how this might be resolved mutually.</p> <p><i>"Be careful not to read most questions about content, interpretation, or assignments as a challenge of authority. Acting as if they are <u>not</u>, even when you suspect they are, can convey a sense of confidence and control. Sometimes merely assuring the student, while smiling, that you have indeed reflected on this issue at length and that they too will understand soon why the information or the assignment is valuable diffuses the situation. You may even want to encourage them to ask the question again at a later date if necessary."</i></p>
2. Leaving class too frequently	<p>You might privately ask the student if everything is OK so that they know that you are concerned by their behavior. Don't assume disrespect – it might be a bladder infection or some other physical problem.</p>
3. "Spacing Out" or Sitting With Back to Instructor	<p>Students need to know that their non-verbal behavior is perceived as disinterest. You might ask them after class if they need a more comfortable seat. Some students are extremely shy and it might take half of the semester before they open up enough to make sustained eye contact or face the instructor completely. Remember also that sustained eye contact is a culturally dictated practice that might not be feasible for some students.</p>
4. Verbal or physical threats	<p>As a general rule consult professional experts for assistance immediately.</p>
5. Gum, Food, Pagers, and Cell Phone Disruption	<p>Consequences for breaking this policy might range from the loss of participation points to the offender having to present on a topic of interest to the class. The idea here is to prevent habitual disruption from gum popping and phones ringing.</p>
6. Monopolizing Discussions	<p>Many students are excited and talkative so it might be good to give them a few class periods to settle in. You might approach them initially by saying that you are pleased with the amount of enthusiasm they have for discussion but were hoping that they have suggestions for getting the other class members equally involved.</p>
7. Sleeping in class	<p>Sleeping in class is usually considered rude. Most faculty believe it should not be tolerated and is best curbed up front by waking a sleeping student and asking them to step outside with you. Once there faculty often tell students that it's best for the rest of the class if they return when they are awake enough to be an active participant. This occurs from time to time and you obviously are the one to choose lenience or punitive action. If it's one of your more regularly involved students, perhaps give them an option of an extra credit research assignment they can bring to your next class period covering the subject matter they missed while they were sleeping.</p> <p>An alternative approach is to assume that the student does not feel well, was up most of the night with a sick child, or has some other condition that results in sleepiness when still for long periods of time. You might simply choose to wake the student and ask them if they are feeling alright. To pull this off you need to approach it with true concern for the student's health and well-being. Most of the</p>

	<p>time, students are so embarrassed and so appreciative of your genuine concern that they don't let it happen again.</p> <p>Encourage students to actively participate, take notes (explain that this is helpful to their learning as it stimulates memory in the brain) and in particularly long classes break up the session with activities or paired conversations about a topic to ensure that students stay engaged. Students don't learn much from listening, so remember that the more they "experience" the learning process the more you are really teaching.</p>
8. Repeated Tardiness:	There should be clear parameters set around this issue up front – either in your syllabus or in the class decided norms. Stick to your guns on the policy. Some fair policies might include 3 tardies equals one absence.
9. Refusal to Participate or Speak	We cannot force students to speak in class nor participate in group projects. This can be addressed and become a win-win situation by either giving the student alternative options to verbal participation (unless it's a speech class) or simply carefully coaxing some response out of them and praising whatever minimal effort you receive from them. Remember, some students are terrified to be in a class setting –especially if there are round tables rather than desks – allowing for little anonymity.
10. Sexual Innuendo, Flirting, or Other Inappropriate Suggestion	This behavior should be curbed as soon as it occurs. It's never comfortable to tell a student that they aren't being appropriate and if you are uncomfortable, a short, positive e-mail or phone call might suffice. Your response should be not judgmental and you might discuss it with your department chair or faculty mentor before broaching it with your student.
11. Disrespectful Behavior	The reality is that sometimes students just plain won't like you. You will find yourself in a conversation with yourself about why they don't like you and treat you with disrespect. Animosity will perpetuate itself so remember your role and look for a way to positively invite the student to engage more deeply in the class.