Approaching Difficult Students

Lunch With LeaRN: Brown Bag Discussions
Thursday, October 23rd
Approaching Difficult Students

Instructor senses conflict

Instructor begins approaching or planning approaches to the problem

Crucial time

Weeks in the semester
Implications of Waiting Too Long

- Entrenching students’ attitudes/roles
- Swaying instructor’s impressions, confidence, and classroom management
- Impacting the class as a whole
Approaches to Difficult Students

- Overcoming anonymity
- Setting conduct guidelines
- Taking the pulse of the class
- Meeting with difficult students
- Using strategic group work
- Visualizing/planning approaches
- Seeking help
Overcoming anonymity

- Allow each student to feel “known”
- Build trust by taking yourself lightly
- Insert yourself in students’ space
Setting Conduct Guidelines

- Solicit structured student participation in forming course guidelines
  - Ask students to write about “good” and “poor” experiences in past courses related to class conduct: what contributed to positive and negative experiences? What kind of guidelines make sense?
  - Consider talking through possible scenarios with students (”imagine….”)

- Get the elephant off the table: talk honestly about required courses: students’ expectations and course goals
Taking the Pulse of the Class

- Solicit student feedback on the course and their progress
  - Student information, autobiographical sketch
  - First month conference
  - Muddy point cards
  - “All voices” exercises in discussion
  - Midterm assessment
Meeting with Difficult Students

- Meet informally **early** after sensing a possible problem (e.g. after class)
- Meet formally if the difficulty continues
- Meet with students individually (if a troublesome group is an issue)
Meeting with Difficult Students

- ALWAYS preserve a student’s integrity (be sensitive to students’ losing face, feeling shamed)
- Set pre-conceptions aside: meet each student as you would your “model” student
- Enter the meeting with an open mind
Meeting Suggestions

- Avoid accusatory language
- Ask questions
- Listen actively—summarize what you hear ("so, is it fair to summarize your reaction…")
- Pay attention to the emotions behind the logic
- Establish a goal of communication instead of solution
- Validate or “value” the students’ perspective before explaining the teacher’s perspective
Using Strategic Group Work

- Head off the pitfalls of large group discussion
- Break up difficult groups by establishing new groups
- Allow other students to take the lead and feel invested
- Make the group work meaningful
Visualizing Approaches

- Reduce stress and split-second decisions by outlining approaches ahead of time
- Use humor if possible
Finding Support

• Talk to appropriate colleagues and the department chair
• Contact the Dean of Students Office if you suspect substance abuse, personality disorder, life trauma, etc.
• Take advantage of resources on campus:
  • Dean of Students Office, ECTL, UW School Partnership, Counseling Center
• Don’t let the problem take over your life!
Course-based Considerations

- Strive for clarity and simplicity in course policies
- Pay attention to themes and trends in student evaluations
- Consider giving course outlines in segments