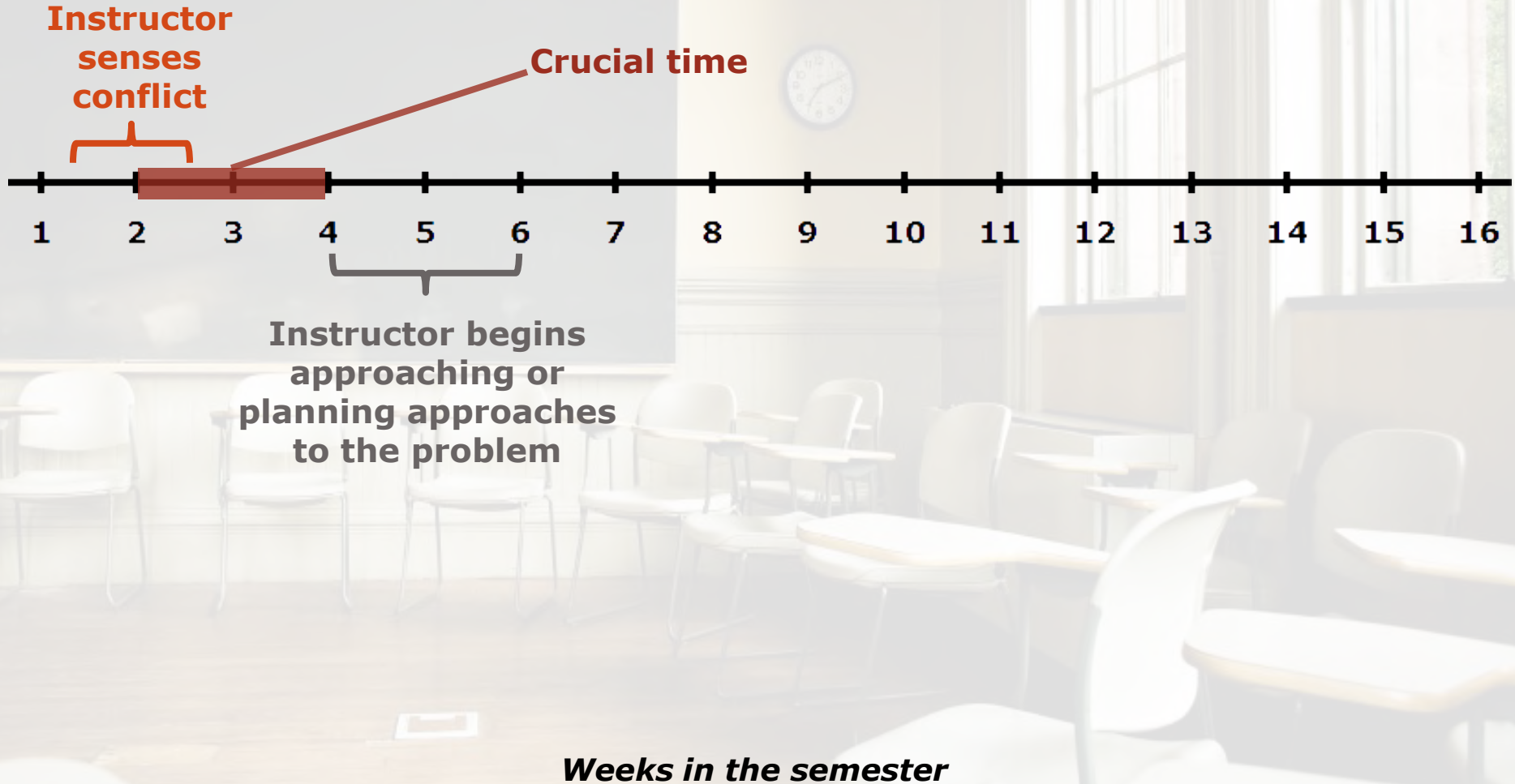# Approaching Difficult Students

Lunch With LeaRN: Brown Bag Discussions

Thursday, October 23rd

Approaching Difficult Students

Instructor senses conflict

Crucial time

Instructor begins approaching or planning approaches to the problem

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16

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
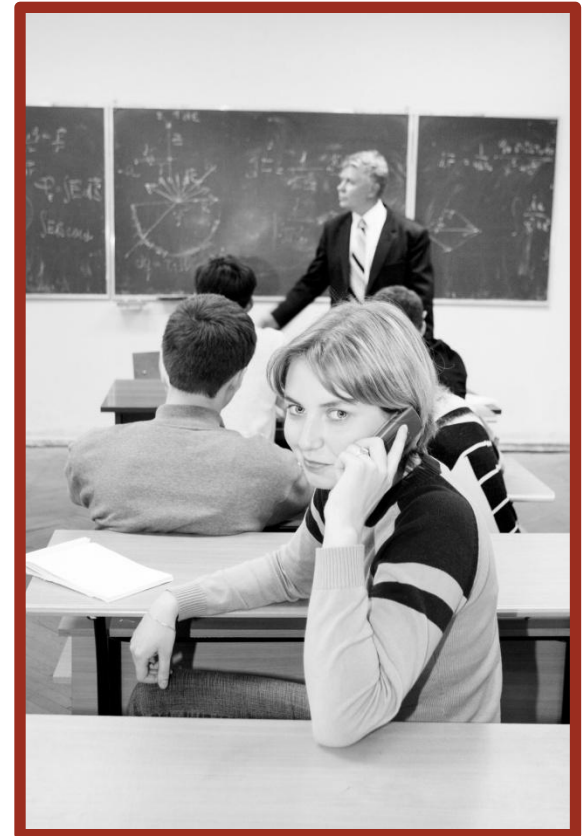
Approaches to Difficult Students

- 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