

Approaching Difficult Students

Teachers who encounter difficulties with one or more students in a class often report that they had an inkling of conflict very early in the semester. However, teachers generally take action only when the situation has escalated, often beyond help. Like most relationships, inspiring civility in challenging classroom situations is best encouraged through laying early groundwork.

I. Classroom Approaches to Minimizing Difficult Behavior

As many major sports events and traffic jams demonstrate, poor behavior increases when people feel anonymous. It's also much easier to attack or disrespect another person when he or she is seen as a one-dimensional personality rather than authentically human (true for both teachers and students!). Building connections in the classroom can be tricky, though, especially in large classes and in circumstances where the instructor may be perceived as already overly vulnerable because of gender, race or ethnicity, physical stature, position (as a GA, new instructor, etc.) or a host of other attributes. The following approaches, while certainly not foolproof, can aid teachers in establishing connections in the classroom that head off many individual difficulties.

Find ways to memorize students' names right away, by asking students to create name table-tents for their desks, ending class by trying to say each student's name, asking a student to take a class photo, or other approaches. Calling someone by name can immediately and powerfully diminish the perception of anonymity. In the first weeks, focus on the students' names you are having difficulty learning; these are often the students who are quieter and less likely to prompt a connection with the teacher.

Move close to students when you speak, and move around the entire classroom periodically. Crossing into students' space noticeably increases their attention and engagement.

When possible, ask every student in the class to speak briefly to an issue or question. Instead of "cold calling" students who you suspect are disengaged, make a habit of sweeping the room for a diversity of reactions (consider asking a student to jot the class's responses on the board). Also, in the first week, try asking students to write a short autobiographical sketch, including their concerns and goals for the semester. This discussion will communicate your interest and provide insight into students' backgrounds.

Use humor and "good humored" methods to handle disruptions. Rather than taking disruptive behavior personally and overly seriously (a reaction that can escalate problems), use humor when possible to diffuse problem behavior.

Approach each student as if she or he is your ideal student. Students are hyper-attuned to the subtle messages coming across in an instructor's tone of voice, words, and body language. Try to move beyond the "like/dislike" response, and be willing to question your own reactions and assumptions about students. During interactions, give the respect you offer your "best" students.

Minimize the unexpected. Conflicts and frustration frequently stem from lack of clarity in class policies and conduct expectations (Carbone). It's important to structure a class so that conflicts **can** happen, and happen civilly. Post conduct and discussion guidelines in the syllabus or set them up with students, and draw attention to them during the first few weeks. Make sure all key class expectations and policies, from significant to mundane, are clearly documented and explained. And, all other factors being equal, the simpler the grading criteria the better.

Conference with students in the first four weeks, in small groups if necessary. Even a five-minute introductory or task-focused conference can go a long way in understanding students' mindsets and easing possible tensions.

II. Approaches to Difficult Students

At some point, odds are it will happen to every teacher. A student arrives in your class who just doesn't click with you personally. In the worst case scenario, the student disrupts the harmony and productivity of the whole class. Some students are overt in their negativity toward the teacher or course, and others are more understated (but no less influential on the teacher's peace of mind!) Because one student can make a pronounced impact on the learning of many, it's important to meet with the frustrated student (or students) at the **early** signs of conflict.

Ask the student to meet during your office hours or after class. Begin by describing the behavior you've observed (e.g. "you seem unengaged in class") rather than labeling the behavior (e.g. "you're acting rude"). In other words, speak in a non-judgmental, non-confrontational way. Listen to the student actively and ask as many questions as possible. Try not to focus only on the logic of the student's narrative: what lies "behind" the rationale is often more revealing of the driving emotions (insecurity, anger, overwhelmed, etc.). Summarize what you're hearing. Show respect by validating the student's response before offering the teacher's perspective. Don't feel you have to reach a resolution; communication is the crucial outcome. If appropriate, develop a plan for continued communication (Kuhlenschmidt & Layne).

Be sensitive to "over-kill" in attempting to resolve the problem, but don't give up too soon. Stay calm and professional in every circumstance.

Before class, develop several possible courses of action to address a student or group of students who are causing disturbances. Play scenarios out in your mind. Take the "high road" and plan approaches that avoid diminishing students but also do not tolerate negative effects on the class dynamic and ability to engage (Cozzens).

Use group work strategically to separate groups of disruptive students and offset the pitfalls of open large group discussions. Plan group activities that are structured, credit bearing if possible, and meaningful to an assignment or key class discussion. Pre-designate the groups.

Seek help in the event that circumstances don't improve by reporting the situation to the department chair. Brainstorming with others, feeling supported, and knowing your options are crucial elements in working through tough situations.

Be easy on yourself. Most teachers have a natural tendency to become consumed with a classroom problem by allowing insecurities to creep in and losing sight of the bigger picture. Be aware of your own emotional response; resist the web of overanalyzing. Keep your balance.

Additional Information

If you suspect substance abuse, personality disorder, life trauma, or other influences beyond your ability and authority to address, contact the Dean of Students Office in Knight Hall 128 (766-3296).

Online Resources: Student Code of Conduct, Responding to Disruptive People, and Guidelines for faculty and staff at the University of Wyoming: Regarding disturbing or disruptive student behavior are available here: www.uwyo.edu/LRN/resources.asp.

Resources

Carbone, Elisa. (1999). Students behaving badly in large classes. In Steven Richardson (Ed.), *Promoting Civility: A Teaching Challenge*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Kuhlenschmidt, S. L. & Layne, L. E. (1999). Strategies for dealing with difficult behavior. In Steven Richardson (Ed.), *Promoting Civility: A Teaching Challenge*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Cozzens, D. (2008) Responding to disruptive people. University of Wyoming.