

Dealing with Disruptive Behavior in the Classroom

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First, at the Center for Teaching, Learning & Technology (CTLT) resource center (ITDC 107), we have a few handouts (two short articles, a very short bibliography, and pages from the student judicial web site) from a CTLT event on authority and disruptive behavior. Anyone wishing a copy of this material should send an e-mail request to Beth Welch. In addition, we have a new book titled "From Discipline to Development: Rethinking Student Conduct in Higher Education" as well as several books with chapters on problem situations and disruptive behavior (for example, McKeachie's "Teaching Tips" and Davidson and Ambrose's "The New Professor's Handbook"). Feel free to drop by, have a cup of coffee, and look through our materials. These books may be checked out by instructors (see Beth in room 111).

Second, instructors have the right to tell a student who is disrupting class to leave the class for THAT particular class period. In extreme cases, campus security can be called to remove the student. Instructors may not remove a student from the whole course (that is, kick them out for the rest of the semester) without due process for the student. Contact Community Rights & Responsibilities (8-8621) if you wish to consider such action.

Third, let me offer (as many others have) some strategies instructors might use to deal with disruptive behavior. Of course, these won't all fit every instructor's style, class environment, or particular type of disruption. They won't work with every student. Generally, I recommend you start with attempts to prevent these situations. Then, if they still occur, you start with less aggressive, less controlling strategies using more serious tactics if the behaviors persist. Remember that these problems can be more common for instructors with status inconsistency (women, minorities, international, young, TAs...). Also, remember if you can figure out why the student(s) is being disruptive, it can help you decide what to do. This takes good observation skills and conversations with colleagues and students.

The best place to start, of course, is to try to prevent disruptive behavior in the first place; something that is only partially under instructor control. How can we do this?

1. Include course and behavior norms and expectations for students and instructors in our syllabi.
2. Discuss these norms and expectations on the first day of class. Tell students you expect that they will act appropriately, but that you always like to remind students of these norms.
3. Serve as role models and exhibit the types of behavior we expect from students.
4. Share control and responsibility with students in the class asking them on the first day what the norms for classroom behavior should be, and adding their ideas to your list.
5. Draw up a "contract" on classroom behavior and ask students to read and sign it the first week of class (this can also include that they agree to attend class, participate, be prepared...).
6. Use impression management and your status by dressing and acting professionally. Refer to yourself as "Doctor" or "professor" and have students do so as well (though for some faculty or in some circumstances it is more appropriate to reduce the status differences between you and your students).
7. Be extra tough on all matters the first day and week to set the "tone." You can always be flexible and nurturing later.

If disruptive behaviors occur despite your efforts at prevention, you must act in some way and as early/quickly as possible. Otherwise, you can "lose control" of the classroom (not that you want all the control, but you want some), frustrate other students, and create a hostile learning environment. Not everyone will agree with all these suggestions.

1. 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, lets your chairperson know what is happening early on, and that you are trying to deal with it.
2. Walk over to the talkative students and conduct class standing right next to them.
3. 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.

4. 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.
5. Discuss the disruptive behavior in private outside of class with some of the concerned and nondisruptive students. Ask for their assistance in maintaining a positive classroom environment.
6. On a given day when this behavior occurs change what you are doing. Break students in to groups for some work. Call on these and other students to come forward and lead discussion.
7. Consider changing the structure of the whole class. Is it all lecture and/or 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 students.
8. 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.
9. 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 in terms of what your syllabus says and how you handle it).
10. 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 negatively affects your ability to work, teaching-learning is being harmed and the class time is already a waste.
11. Ask the student(s) to leave the classroom for that class period.
12. Inform the students that it is unfair to everyone for this behavior to continue and that you will not continue that class period until it stops. If it does not stop, tell the student you are leaving but they are still responsible for the material and welcome to come to your office hours. Leave.
13. File charges about the student(s) with Community Rights & Responsibilities. Be sure to inform the student(s) first that you plan to do this.

Finally, concern about students' reactions and negative comments or scores 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 the disruptive students should further reduce any negative effects. Discussing the problem openly with students may also help. Beyond that, you should consider including material with your student evaluations to your DFSC if you feel the disruptive behavior or your responses to it negatively affected your evaluations. You can write a letter expressing your view of the situation and what you did. You can ask that a colleague talk with some of your students (who felt you did handle things well or did the best that was possible in the situation). You can submit other documentation (besides student evaluations) for your teaching (teaching portfolio, peer observation, copies of syllabi and assignments, evidence of teaching service or faculty development in teaching, papers on teaching published or presented...). Finally, if you discussed the problem with your chair and colleagues earlier, they will have a context in which to place the student evaluations.

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