

How to Assure Classroom Civility and Decorum

Disruptive student behaviors pose a challenge for college instructors. In some instances, behaviors are disruptive, but in extreme circumstance they can become threatening. The key is dealing with them swiftly and appropriately.

What Constitutes a Disruptive Behavior?

In her book *Tools for Teaching* (2009), Barbara Gross Davis devotes the fourth chapter, "Classroom Conduct and Decorum," to maintaining classroom civility and dealing with disruptive behaviors. Davis states, "Examples of disruptive student behavior include disturbing others when arriving late or leaving early; packing up books before class is over; dozing in class; reading the newspaper; noisy eating or drinking; checking social networking sites; shopping, or playing games on laptops; text messaging on cell phones; conducting side conversations; and hostile public challenges to course policies and procedures," (pg. 48).

Dealing with Disruptive Behaviors

Davis begins by advising instructors to define policies in writing at the start of the term and emphasis the value of civility. An instructor can take a negative tone and list the behaviors that will not be tolerated. Or that instructor can take a positive tone and state the behaviors that are expected, civil behaviors. Davis does discuss this issue nor provide any advice in this regard. I have no basis other than my own opinion for stating which is best, but it is my blog so I will share my opinion.

The first approach is more direct and therefore may clarify issues best. However, in a way it says to students, "I believe these are behaviors you find acceptable and may attempt. You probably have acted in these ways in the past, but not in my class you don't!" The second approach sends a different message, something like, "I hope you agree with me that by following these rules, this course will be a more pleasurable experience for all of us." On the first day of class (see my article on that), some instructors break students into groups to discuss and report on what they believe is important for the class to run well.

Davis's next piece of advice is paramount and embodies the nature of an effective instructor. Davis advises faculty members to "Set a good example." If an instructor comes to class late, is inadequately prepared, interacts poorly with students, fails to provide help, lacks integrity, and dismisses class early that sends a negative message to students. For more on this, see *The Perceived Quality of a College Instructor and Do Boy Scouts Make the Best Instructors?*

When incivilities occur, Davis advises instructors to take prompt and consistent action. Disruptors must be made aware of the problem. Move toward students holding a side conversation and make eye contact, or simply ask them to stop because their talk is distracting others. If students become overly emotional, Davis encourages faculty to acknowledge the feelings but not to explore them. It may be best to speak with the student after class. Talking with a student in private is called for when a behavior is extreme or

when a benign but disruptive behavior continues, as in *The Case of the Cantankerous Canary*.

When issues arise between students, Davis advises the instructor to encourage students to use the college grievance process. I encourage instructors to explain the process by which students may be referred to the disciplinary board. An instructor, especially a new instructor, should be intimately familiar with these policies and procedures at his or her college.

Teaching During the Aftermath of Tragic Events

Davis devotes the last section of this chapter to “Teaching in Times of Crisis and Tragedy.” (I encourage you to read this section, because my brief synopsis will not do it justice.) When events outside the classroom create a distraction or disruption, show empathy. Do not forage through your lesson plan. Give the class time to discuss what happened. In some instances, the instructor can make assignments that relate to the tragedy. I attended my class in qualitative research the evening that terrorists flew hijacked jetliners into the World Trade Center. Our instructor guided us in a discussion for most of the class period.

Dealing With Threatening or Violent Behaviors in the College Classroom

(Dr. Davis does not address this topic, but I will.)

February 14, 2008, a gunman emerged from behind a curtain and walked onto the stage of a Northern Illinois University lecture hall. He shot 21 people, five of them fatally, before turning the gun on himself. There have been other instances of campus violence, but this one occurred at my alma mater, less than ten miles from my home. That afternoon and late into the evening, my wife, a trained crisis intervention specialist, counseled the families of victims. Needless to say, that tragedy left a lasting impression on me and my wife.

There was no way the professor could have prevented this situation, but there are other less violent situations for which instructors should be prepared. Weapons can be carried into class. Students may make verbal assaults. Fights can break out. Instructors should find out what procedures your college has in place for responding to and dealing with such situations. They should be prepared to call for emergency assistance by programming their cell phones with 911 and the college emergency response number.

In addition, instructors should be sensitive to the moods and behaviors of their students. They should report any unusual behaviors to the appropriate authorities at the college. Usually this would be someone in Counseling.

I hope I haven't scared any of you adjuncts away from teaching, but these are the realities of the age in which we live. In my four years as a dean, I have had to deal with the aftermath of one classroom fight. I had to bring in campus police after I learned that a student threatened fellow students with a knife. And I have myself observed and reported several students displaying symptoms of depression. In one case, I dropped what I was doing and walked the student to our Counseling Department.

Summary – How to Deal with Disruptive Student Behaviors

There are a number of strategies for college instructors to use to promote civility and classroom decorum. And when disruptive behaviors occur, there are methods instructors can use to effectively deal with them.

- Establish and document policies for classroom behavior.
- Involve your students in a discussion of those policies.
- Deal swiftly with disruptive behaviors.
- Confront students in private.
- Know and abide by your college's policies and procedures for dealing with disruptive and threatening behaviors.
- Report unusual behaviors.
- Be prepared to call for help.

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