Best Practices in Classroom Management

What you'll find in this resource:

🤝 Classroom Civility: Creating a Culture of Respect

In her book, A Survival Handbook for Teaching Large Classes, Sallie Ives, of the Center for Teaching & Learning in University of North Carolina, advises that:

"*There is no one way to teach a large class. We have to take into account our teaching style, the characteristics of our students, and the goals and objectives of our course.*"

Many of the variables that affect how a large class is taught—student characteristics or room layout, for example—will also determine how to manage student behavior. Because these "behavior-related variables are constantly changing, there will never be just one way to manage disruptive conduct. As Ives (2000) concludes, get a sense of which factors play a role in your class, then "decide which [techniques] are most likely to work for you, and try them!"

Whatever method you try, a number of authors suggest that you are wise to "*apply the principle of prevention*." Manage issues before they arise through the use of creative course design, and by collaborating with students when setting ground rules or determining how to deliver course material (CIDR, University of Washington). By applying some of the strategies outlined in this document, classroom disruption will "not magically go away," but it "will be significantly reduced" (CTE, Virginia Commonwealth University).

A Note About Course Design

Throughout this document, you will see the term "active learning." Many authors suggest that "much of the disruptive behavior that is witnessed in large classes is due to disengagement, boredom, and/or restlessness" (CTE, Virginia Commonwealth University). In a large classroom, classroom management issues have been shown to diminish significantly when didactic lectures and passive learning are replaced with material that is well-designed, and promotes student engagement through inclusiveness, active learning, and frequent testing and assessment" (CTE, Virginia Commonwealth University). To minimize the issues affecting student conduct even further, "make sure that the material covered in class is vital to students' mastery of the subject and that students understand the connection" (Sorcinelli, 2003).

The First Day of Class: Proactive Methods for Curbing Disruptive Behavior

Set the right tone at the very beginning of class—enter the lecture hall with confidence and authority (Visano, 2003). "Look and sound confident. Arrive at class prepared and handle yourself professionally at all times to indicate that you are in charge" (CTE, University of Waterloo).

Visano and Sorcinelli suggest establishing a clear "**a starting ritual**" that will get the student's attention. Once you find one that works, apply it consistently throughout the term" (Sorcinelli, 2003).

For example, students respond well to changes in the environment—flick or dim the lights, use a countdown tool on the screen, or test the lectern microphone (Sorcinelli, 2003). Have music playing in the background or an interesting video clip/cartoon on the screen while you are setting up. Indicate the beginning of your lecture by removing the cartoon or turning off the music. Students may take a few seconds to realize a change occurred. "Greet students in a firm tone, pause until all students have stopped talking, and thank them for their respect. Start your first lecture in this way and continue throughout the semester" (Visano, 2003).

Make sure that everyone can hear you. If you are not doing so already, "learn to project your voice effectively, encourage students to speak up, and repeat student questions and responses for those who may not have heard." Most importantly, start and end class on time and do not start or continue lecturing while students are talking (CTE, University of Waterloo).

Once you have their full attention, **clearly define your expectations** (CTE, Virginia Commonwealth University). On the first day of class, consult with your students about the class "courtesy policy... The importance of establishing norms and setting expectations for a class at the outset cannot be overstated" (Visano, 2003). "A carefully planned first meeting, a clear syllabus, and simply relating to students on a personal basis can help establish a positive atmosphere and avoid problems that may arise from confusion about guidelines for classroom behaviour" (Sorcinelli, 2003).

Establish and communicate reasonable ground rules for student behaviour on the first day (e.g. no talking during lectures or student presentations; all cell phones should be turned off; no talking in class or arriving late). Set limits on when students can pack up and leave, or when they're allowed to eat and drink (Gross Davis, 1993). Provide a brief rationale for your rules, with a focus on students showing respect for other students (CTE, University of Waterloo). "Try in some way to give students the sense that they are responsible for their behaviour in class, and need to show respect for other students' chance to learn" (Day, McMaster University).

Have the students add to the conversation by collaboratively developing the ground rules for the course. Encourage them to envision a classroom environment that will be the most conducive to their learning (CTE, Virginia Commonwealth University; CTE, University of Waterloo). "Ask them to think through behaviours that might undermine their classmates' learning, and how those behaviours should be addressed or managed by the instructor or by the rest of the class. Try to get them to see the ground rules as a social contract whose aim is to support their mutual learning" (CTE, University of Waterloo).

By including students in the conversation, you can begin to develop a culture of respect and a mutually agreed upon academic "code of conduct." This "community policing" model makes sure that any behavioral problems will not be perceived as "professor vs. student," but as "whole class vs. student" (LTO, Ryerson University)

Ideally, the Derek Bok Center, Harvard University recommends that you should have the following established by the end of the second class:

Explicit Contracts (often found in syllabi)

- Weekly classroom topics
- Reading assignments, when to read each piece
- Writing assignments, dates due
- Exams, dates
- Rules about late papers, absences
- Often, grading percentages

Implicit Contracts (often unspoken; many could be discussed)

- Who talks in this classroom; when; how long; how do they get the floor?
- Who sets the agenda, how shared is it?
- Is this a place for competition or collaboration?
- Is it safe to make mistakes, to fail?
- What is success in this classroom? How is it measured? How is it achieved?
- What are the boundaries between student and teacher? Between student and student?
- What levels of learning are featured: intellectual, emotional, experiential, ethical?
- What styles of learning are emphasized: Structured? Open?
- What is the big agenda? What is the storyline of the course? What are the underlying questions?
- What will be learned? Are students asked to learn facts, to think through problems?
- Why is the professor doing what he/she is doing when he/she does it?

For faculty in professional programs, such as engineering or nursing, any discussion of ground rules should include a brief mention of professional regulations and the expectation that students in these programs behave like "professionals."

Including a conduct statement in the course syllabus gives you an impartial document to return to should you need a way to reinforce your rules (CTE, University of Waterloo). You should hand out the syllabus by the second class, post it on your website, and make it available during your office hours.

Here's a sample conduct statement for Course Outlines developed by the Derek Bok Center, Harvard University:

A Word About Conduct in Large Classes

This is a large class but you are not a small part of it! To make our time together as valuable as possible, we both have to work hard at it. The following basic principles may give us some guidelines:

- Every student has the right to learn as well as the responsibility not to deprive others of their right to learn.
- Every student is accountable for his or her own actions.

In order for you to get the most out of this class, please consider the following:

- Attend all scheduled classes and arrive on time. Late arrivals and early departures are very disruptive and violate the first basic principle.
- Please do not schedule other activities during this class time. I will try to make class as interesting and informative as possible, but I can't learn the material for you.
- Please let me know immediately if you have a problem that is preventing you from performing satisfactorily in this class.

I am looking forward to working with you this term.

In addition to collaboratively developing the course rules, it is wise to **decrease anonymity as much as possible**. While "anonymity does not equal invisibility" (Visano, 2003), most students feel that their behavior will go unnoticed if they are lost in a sea of faces. Introduce yourself and ask students to introduce themselves to classmates around them (Gross Davis 1993; Sorcinelli, 2003). Provide as much personal access as possible (e.g. Arrive at class early and stay late, schedule office hours immediately after class, or visit labs or discussion sections). Use technology to get to know students (e.g. email them, respond to their emails, or survey the class using web tools). When students have personal relationships with their teacher as well as their peers, civility will come more easily.

Part of establishing a relationship is examining your own teaching style and seeking feedback from students. **Ask students for help in determining what is and isn't working in class** (Sorcinelli, 2003). Surveys of students' "pet peeves about teaching" reveal that many are concerned about lecturing behaviours—including poor organization, visuals, pacing, and use of class time (Perlman & McCann, 1998, as cited in Sorcinelli, 2003). Other complaints include talking down to students, being unhelpful or unapproachable, and employing confusing testing and grading practices (Perlman & McCann, 1998, as cited in Sorcinelli, 2003).

Fairness and consistency are important—once rules are established, don't change them or make exceptions. Students may perceive inconsistency as indicative of unfairness or

preferential treatment. Once this happens, morale and motivation drops and class atmosphere may become adversarial (LTO, Ryerson University).

Creating a Constructive Classroom Environment Starting Your Lecture

Let students know that you expect them to arrive promptly, but account for stragglers. Instead of starting the class, use the first couple of minutes to discuss a related issue. Shea (1990) describes a faculty member in political science who would begin class with a discussion of a relevant news item.

In order to preserve valuable lecture time, the Centre for Leadership in Learning at McMaster University suggests inviting students to submit any questions about past or current course material in writing or via email. Start each lecture addressing these questions or other issues brought up by students (Ahmad, 2004). Admit when you can't answer a question, offer to find the answer, and then report back next class. Avoid getting bogged down in material about which you are unsure or which has not been covered (CTE, University of Waterloo).

During Your Lecture

Be Enthusiastic. Your excitement is contagious. Never say, "This is really boring." Make all your examples timely or relevant to your students. Show the connection between the concrete and the abstract—this may be obvious to you, but it is not always clear to the students (CLL, McMaster University)

Encourage active learning. Studies suggest that active learning methods engage students with content in ways that go beyond the acquisition of knowledge. Active learning can develop positive relationships among students, as well as improve performance in required competencies and critical thinking skills. A number of active learning strategies are particularly suited to large classes (Sutherland & Bonwell, 1996; Carbone, 1998; Stanley & Porter, 2002, as cited in Sorcinelli, 2003).

Give short in-class writing exercises to stimulate thought; pair students to discuss questions, accomplish specific tasks, or share responses. Have students turn to the person next to them to discuss a problem or question. This will break up the flow of the class and help to recapture students' attention. It will also give you an opportunity to approach the disruptive students and discuss your concerns with them (CTE, University of Waterloo).

Laptop use. To minimize disruptions caused by students engaged in non-course related work on their laptops (e.g. watching a movie), here are some suggestions that came out of a Ryerson workshop on teaching large classes:

- **Involve laptop use in class activities**. Ask students research a topic, perform a computer
  simulation, do calculations, use relevant pieces of software, etc.
- **Create a laptop zone**. Ask students who insist on using their computers to sit to one side of the room
  This will prevent their screen activity from distracting other students. Refrain from making the laptop zone the back row of the classroom as this may single out students with disabilities who may need
  to use their computer and sit towards the front.

Think about lecture pacing and the mix of content

- Introduce humour at appropriate places
- Balance the concrete with the abstract; applied with theoretical
- Provide time for reflection after challenging material (CLL, McMaster University)

Do something different throughout the lecture. Change presentation style, slides or move to another topic every 15-20 minutes. Student attention drops dramatically after 20 minutes, however retention of course material increases when instructors vary their lecture style, ask questions, or do demonstrations.

Breaks are important for both you and your students. Make sure to take a 3-4 minute break every 45 minutes. Keep these breaks constructive. Tell students to take a few minutes to look over and consolidate their notes or compare notes with their neighbours.

In order to determine when a break may be needed, The Harriet W. Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning suggests that it is particularly helpful to try to read the faces of students—it's often very easy to tell who understands and who doesn't, who's tired and who's paying attention. Keep students involved by moving around the classroom (CTE, University of Waterloo). Stop lecturing intermittently and make eye contact with students as you ask if they have any questions (Ahmad, 2004).

Asking questions. For example you could ask "How many of you understand what I have been describing? How many of you would like me to rephrase it?" Look for head nodding, and body movement to give you clues (CLL, McMaster University). Ask a student who looks confused to articulate a question that will help make the ideas clearer (Ahmad, 2004). When possible, provide students with some measure of control over their learning, for example ask "Shall we cover topic A next or B?"

Stop lecturing two to three times per class to ask for questions or comments. Stand there for as long as it takes (even if the silence becomes embarrassing) until you get a question. The next time the questions will start coming right away.

Assign group work when feasible. Break students into small groups to answer a question or solve a problem, or make up questions on the topic that was just covered. Students can form small groups of 2-4 relatively easily in a large auditorium just by turning to their neighbours. Walk around and talk with the students while they work, giving quieter students a chance to speak without doing so in front of the entire class. You can also ask one group per row (or several rows) to present their answers to the class (CLL, McMaster University).

Ending Your Lecture

Another common classroom disruption is caused by students who leave early or begin to pack up their belongings before the end of class. To combat this:

Avoid giving cues that class is ending. If you say "One more point and then we can go," it is likely that students will start packing their bags before you are finished (CTE, University of Waterloo).

Don't let them go early. "Make sure classes take the full period, with no exceptions. Exceptions breed expectations" (CLL, McMaster University).

Don't run overtime. Respect your students—they need to get to other classes. Respect other faculty— keeping students late in your class will cause disruptions in the classes that follow. "If you have trouble keeping track of time, ask your class to give you a five-minute warning" (CLL, McMaster University).

Make the last few minutes important. Use the end of class to review the most important points of the class or indicate what will be coming up in the next class. Go over a few questions that might appear on the next test or review assignment requirements (CTE, University of Waterloo).

Pattern expectations for ending. Set limits on when students can pack up and leave: "You're mine until 2 P.M." or "When the cartoon appears on the overhead you can go or "After the class has posed three good questions about the material, students can leave" (Hilsen, 1988 as cited in Gross Davis, 1993).

When Disruption Happens… How to Deal with Classroom Incivility

When dealing with inattentive or disruptive students, there are several techniques that can be used to address the problem.

Move closer to the disruptive students. Your close proximity may discourage them from continuing their misbehavior.

Make eye contact. Look directly at them while continuing your lecture. Let them know that you see what they are doing.

Ask if they have a question. If students are talking amongst themselves, it might indicate they have missed something or are confused by the material. Increased attention from the professor will quiet down many students.

Make a general statement about the disruption. Rather than singling students out, simply remind the class that they agreed to a set of rules on day one of the class, and that the disruption bothers other students as much as it bothers you.

Call the offending student(s) up after class. Avoid arguing with students during class or embarrassing them in front of their peers. Indicate after class that the behavior was unacceptable. Ask them about the disruption—was there an underlying cause for their behavior?

Ask the offending student(s) to leave. If the misbehavior continues unabated, don't lose your temper or allow the situation to escalate. Instead, ask the disruptive students to leave class. Don't resume the lecture until the guilty party has left the room.

(CTE, University of Waterloo; CLL, McMaster University; Encouraging Civil Behavior in Large Classes by Mary Deane Sorcinelli; CTE, University of Maryland; LTO, Ryerson University)

When dealing with challenges to your authority or hostile students, avoid becoming confrontational or angry in front of your students, instead

Respond honestly to challenges, explaining — not defending — your instructional objectives and how assignments contribute to them" (*Encouraging Civil Behavior* in Large Classes by Mary Deane Sorcinelli).

The Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning at Harvard University has compiled the following tips for dealing with "hot moments" in the classroom:

Hold Steady. Your behaviour provides a model for the students. Don't appear visibly rattled, students will feel safer if you appear to be in control.

Breathe deeply. Take a moment to collect yourself. Allow both yourself and your students time to reflect on the issues raised.

Don't let yourself get caught up in a personal reaction to the individual who has made some unpleasant remark. It's easy to want to tear into a student who is personally offensive to you. To do so is to fail to see what that student and his or her ideas represent in the classroom and in the larger world. If you take the remarks personally, chances are you will not be able to

find what there is to learn from them. Keep some distance from the comments and find ways to use them to enhance people's understanding.

Know yourself. Know your biases and what will push your buttons. Knowing what those areas are will enable you to devise strategies for managing yourself and the class when such a moment arises.

Finally, if the behavior reoccurs, **document everything.** "Write a letter to the student. Describe the behavior, how it disrupts you and other students, restate your expectations for behavior, and outline specific changes you would like to see. (*Encouraging Civil Behavior* in Large Classes by Mary Deane Sorcinelli)

Resources at Ryerson

Ryerson has a **Student Code of Non-Academic Conduct** that applies to behaviour in the classroom. If you have any questions about the code and how it applies to the classroom environment, please contact the Student Conduct Officer.

On the rare occasion that a student is alarmingly hostile or threatening, contact **Ryerson Security and Emergency Services**: 416-979-5040 or dial 80 from any internal phone

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