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Tomorrow's Teaching and Learning ----- 2,944 words -----
Dealing with Disruptive Student Behavior

Of course, even when you take steps to prevent disruptive behavior you can never guarantee a disruption-free class. Generally, it is as well to give any sort of disruptive student the minimum attention necessary because time focused on disruptive behavior is time that is not being spent on facilitating learning. Also, there is a danger of drawing other students into the situation who will then escalate the disruption. The golden rule of dealing with disruptive behavior is never to do anything that will make the situation worse. Below are suggestions for dealing with the most common types of disruptive behavior.

Dealing with noisy students Students holding side conversations, using mobile phones or MP3 players can be quite off-putting for you and for other students. A direct approach of "Please don't use your mobile phone" can often be the most effective. Consider starting the class with something like "Please switch all phones off, we're about to start." This not only sets the ground rules but also clearly indicates that the session has begun. It's not a good idea to embarrass students who are talking or assume that their conversation isn't related to what is being discussed in class. You may therefore wish to avoid direct confrontation, in which case the following are often successful.

- * Stop talking in mid-sentence and look in a non-aggressive way at the student making the noise. Peer pressure may quieten them.

- * Try speaking more quietly. This causes the noisy students to become more obvious in contrast and other students may ask them to quieten down.

* Make direct eye contact with the student/s so that they know you can see them.

* Direct a question to the area in which the noisy students are sitting. This focuses attention on that area of the class.

* Try physically moving to the part of the room where the students are and continue to lead the class whilst standing next to them.

* If you hear a student make an interesting comment you could respond to it, thereby encouraging comments from other students.

* Consider legitimizing the chatting by breaking the class into mini-discussion groups.

Dealing with inattentive students Students who don't pay attention are not necessarily disruptive and you should weigh up the benefits of interceding before acting. If you decide you would like to increase a student's attentiveness it is a good idea to try to make eye contact with them. You may also find that students are suddenly more attentive if you ask them a question, if you explicitly relate the topic to assessment or keep them active.

Dealing with late arrivers This is one of those matters which is high on most lecturer's list of problems. How you handle late-comers will be one of the things that sets the whole tone of your classes. The following suggestions may help you to weigh up the pros and cons of a variety of tactics, and to choose what will work best for you. Don't forget that sometimes students have good reasons for being late. There may have been a transport problem. They may have just come from a previous lecture on a distant part of the campus - or another campus altogether. Their previous lecture may have over-run - this isn't their fault. Avoid saying anything irretrievable. It could be that this was the first time ever that the late-comer had been late and/or it might have been unavoidable, but they still plucked up the courage to come in. Remember that the late-comer has at least got to you. If you are too hard on late-comers, they may well decide simply not to come at all next time they're late for your sessions. This may well cause you more problems, not least that regular late-comers who become regular absentees are much more likely to fail your course or module, and this reflects on you even when it's not your fault. Recognize that at least some disruption is inevitable. It's usually best not to simply carry on as though no one was making their late way into the class. At the very least some of the other students may well miss something you said, distracted by the late-comer's entrance. Sometimes it's best simply to pause till the late-comer is settled in. In any case, a few extra moments to gather your own thoughts can

often be useful. When there are repeated disturbances through the arrival of successive late-comers, the majority of the students often have their own ways of showing their disapproval concerning the disruption, sparing you from having to do anything. If students are habitually arriving late for your class and distracting students who arrive on time, then let students know that the first five minutes of each class will cover material relating directly to the assignment. You don't then need to make special efforts to brief late-comers about what they may have missed - and indeed if those without good reasons for being late begin to realize that they are missing useful things, they will tend to try to be more punctual in future.

Dealing with early leavers This same approach of including something relevant to assessment can be applied to the last five minutes of class to encourage students not to leave early. If students see the value in being there they are more likely to make the effort. If this doesn't have any effect on persistent early leavers (or late attenders) then you need to tread carefully. You may wish to state clearly your expectations for attendance, but equally you may wish not to risk alienating the students. Whatever you do, don't waste time at the beginning or end of the session discussing excuses as this is unfair to the rest of the class and is unproductive.

Dealing with domineering students Some students can overpower the group and inhibit the contributions and learning of others. It's your responsibility to manage the group, without alienating these students or disrupting learning. In a small group, make eye contact with the domineering student and then thank them for their contribution. Then try asking someone in another part of the room to speak. If the student persists in dominating the discussion summarize their point and ask others to speak, or indicate that you are ready to move on by starting to prepare for the next activity.

Dealing with rambling students Some students can regularly wander around and off the subject. Clearly this can detract from the learning experience of other students. It is important to try to refocus the student's attention by restating relevant points and asking the student to summarize their main point. Try directing questions to the group, perhaps using visual aids to bring the discussion back on track.

Dealing with distressed students Whilst it is good to be empathetic, it is not appropriate for you to become a student's counsellor. It is not your responsibility to offer therapy but to manage the situation to enable the rest of the class to get on with their learning. Refer students with emotional, psychological or financial trouble to the appropriate counsellors.

Dealing with challenges to your authority Some students may make a habit of disagreeing with everything you say. You should consider recognizing their opinions, pulling out any valid points and restating them before moving on, perhaps drawing the rest of the group into the discussion. It is important not to be

sidetracked or to enter into an argument. It may be best to arrange to discuss the issues with the student out of class time. Be willing to explain, but not necessarily to defend, your position.

Dealing with disruptive students online Possibly because of the difficulty in interpreting emotions, disruptions to online classes can be challenging to manage. Disruption can be direct such as abusive emails, or less direct such as a student posting material which offends some others. Following are some methods for dealing with disruptive students online:

- * Delete any inappropriate postings on the discussion board.
- * Phone or email the disruptive student and objectively inform the student of the problem and how they were disruptive.
- * Explain what the possible consequences will be if they continue to be disruptive.
- * For a persistent offender consider blocking the student from posting in a forum or removing that student from the group.
- * Save any postings for future reference.

Ineffective ways to deal with disruption Most of us learn the hard way that there are some avenues which are NOT advisable when dealing with disruption in class.

1. **Reacting aggressively.** Although you may find that in the short term shouting at students works, in the longer term students may lose respect for you if the only way you can maintain control of a class is by losing control of yourself. It is not a good idea to try to intimidate students as this may lead to a stand-off where students not wishing to lose face may challenge you further. At the very least you are likely to reduce their engagement.
2. **Ignoring the disruption.** It is inadvisable to ignore or give in to unacceptable behavior as you may find that the disruption increases and you risk losing control of the class. It's also not generally a good idea to resort to sarcasm or embarrassing students, as you may harm your credibility and lose respect.
3. **Punishing the non-disruptive students.** If you refuse to carry on until a couple of chattering students quieten down then this penalizes the non-disruptive students. Equally, locking the door five minutes into class time stops the chronic late comers but also penalizes the student who may have an unavoidable reason for being late.

A far better way to deal with disruption is to focus on maintaining control without resorting to aggression or sarcasm. Don't let a crisis turn into a drama! This is the golden rule in dealing with disruptive students, particularly in large-group contexts like lectures. This is perhaps best illustrated by a case study.

One Thursday, Dr. Smith was lecturing to a large class in a research-led university. He was teaching a rather difficult (and not particularly interesting) mathematical area of an engineering topic, and his students were getting fed up, both with Dr. Smith and the subject. Dr. Smith himself was rather more interested in his research than his teaching at the time of the incident and was somewhat stretched by also getting a funding bid in on time, so his patience was not at its optimum. When he turned to the board to write a

rather cumbersome equation for the students to copy down, a student whistled. He turned round but could not see who had whistled. When he returned writing the equation, the whistle was heard again. He again turned round, but still could not distinguish the culprit. He turned round quickly enough at the next occurrence of the whistle, and caught the student who had whistled. He was quite cross at this point, and asked the student to leave the lecture. The student refused. As you may imagine, this crisis had turned into a drama. There was no going back. In fact, Dr. Smith had to be taken off the course concerned, as uppermost in the minds of that set of students would be the incident from that Thursday. The pivotal point was Dr. Smith asking the student to leave - and the student refusing. This was an irreversible step. In an instant, even many of the students who actually found the whistling juvenile and irritating tended to side with the offender. If the student had left, the incident may have receded away from the consciousness of the student group over time, but the student still remained. Short of getting the university's security staff to take the student away there was no turning back, and that in itself would have constituted an irreversible step. It is not surprising that something rather dramatic, such as the incident above, is likely to be considerably more memorable to the students than the rather dry and boring topic that was being covered in the lecture. The fact that the result was for Dr. Smith to be taken off the course was naturally taken as a victory by the students, even though most of them had little time for the offending student's behavior that day. Perhaps the most important learning point from this story is that it only takes a second or two to get into an irreversible drama with a large group of students.

A ten step approach for dealing with disruptive students

1. Don't take the disruption personally Focus on the distraction rather than on the student and don't take disruption personally. Students are often unaware that they are being disruptive. Your attitude will come across to your students so it is important that you remain positive and give students the benefit of the doubt. By remaining objective and not taking the situation personally, you can respond in a calm manner.
2. Stay calm It is a good idea to take control of the situation before you become impatient, upset or irritated. You will be much more authoritative when you are perceived to be dealing with the distraction in a composed manner and when students believe that you like them. Don't become angry or sarcastic as this will make the situation worse. Save your energies for your teaching.
3. Decide when you will deal with the situation It is very important that you allow students to save face where possible. The class will not always respond well if you put students down in front of others. If the nature of the disruption requires you to have a lengthy discussion with the student, then arrange to meet after class. However, it is best to address most disruptive

behaviors quickly and immediately as they arise. 4. Be polite Don't get into an argument. It is far better to say "I'd like to continue with the class" or "It is important that you concentrate for the next few minutes" than "Don't talk when I'm talking." 5. Listen to the student Really listen to what a disruptive student is saying. Where it is practicable let them finish and don't interrupt them. Put yourself in their shoes and try to understand what is lying behind the disruption. 6. Check you understand Ask questions until you have enough information to understand the situation. 7. Decide what you're going to do Think win-win but always prioritize the learning experience of the non-disruptive students. 8. Explain your decision to the student Tell the students what you have decided, explain your rationale and check they understand. 9. Follow through - You must do what you said you would do! Don't threaten actions you are not prepared to carry out or that you are not able to ensure are carried out. Only in the most drastic of situations should you ask a student to leave the class - what will you do if a student refuses to leave? Only as a very last resort should you leave the class yourself. Don't threaten to do these things unless you are prepared to follow through on them. 10. Document your decisions Where the disruption has resulted in significant action it is a good idea to document the nature of the disruption, your actions and the rationale for your decision. This will help you to reflect and evaluate. Conclusion No two classes are alike. Each class has its own personality and how you deal with disruptive behavior may differ between classes. It's really helpful if you know all of your students' names because students are less likely to be disruptive if they know that you know them. Where you have tried unsuccessfully to resolve an issue in class it is usually best not to escalate the issue but to attempt to resolve it at a later time outside the classroom. If you are available to students outside class time and if you invite students to contact you with concerns and questions, both these actions can prevent many problems arising in class time. Deal with each distraction objectively. If you're the only one who's being irritated by a particular behavior, such as a student falling asleep, then that behavior is only disruptive if you let it be. If you do anything in class to address a non-disruptive behavior, you transform it into a disruption. You could therefore choose to ignore the behavior. If the behavior seriously annoys you, you could approach the student outside class and ask why they are doing it. All the guidance in this chapter has been directed at dealing with non-threatening disruptive behavior. However, should an incident occur in your class that causes you to fear for your safety or that of your students: * Stay calm. * Do not turn your back on the student. * Do not touch the student. * Call security. Although incidents of this type are rare you never know when

they might occur, so it is a good idea to always carry a mobile phone and to ensure that you know how to contact security. Whilst it is useful to consider how you might deal with disruptions when they arise it is important not to worry overly about maintaining control. Interaction in a session is actually quite a good thing and the unpredictability of each class can enrich the students' and your experience. Although this chapter offers a range of suggestions for how to cope with different types of disruption, often the best course of action is the simplest; to ask the disruptive students to stop what they're doing. Finally, remember that most students are polite and helpful and want to learn!