

Difficult Classroom Situations

Department TA Training Session

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Acknowledgments

- Nearly everything in this presentation is lifted wholesale from the following article:
 - Wingert, D. and Molitor, T. *Best Practices: Preventing and Managing Challenging Classroom Situations*. Currents in Teaching and Learning. Vol. 1 No. 2. Spring 2009.

Outline

- Unprepared students
- Inattentive students
- Students reluctant to participate
- Hostile/oppositional students
- Argumentative/heated discussions
- Cheating/dishonesty

Unprepared students

- A small group of students often attends your class, but its members have not read the assigned readings, and therefore contribute little in discussions. How would you handle this situation?

Things you can do

- Give brief, periodic quizzes
- Provide study questions or study guides to be completed by class session (can be submitted for grading)
- Assign students to present selected content to the class

From your survey

- Fears focused more on your own preparedness:
 - “Being asked difficult questions which I think I cannot answer.”
 - “Being discovered unprepared for the class.”
 - “...maybe even just that I lose my train of thought and there’s just silence for a couple of minutes.”
 - “I was asked by a student for the answer to a question I had brought up. I suddenly did not know the answer and was unable to respond during the class.”

Inattentive students

- A few students enjoy reading the paper during class or frequently carry on their own conversation, which, at times, annoys others. How would you handle this situation?

Things you can do

- Try using small groups (increases engagement)
- Use Think/Pair/Share (call on inattentive students, after asking a question that students think about and share with a peer)
- Use Write/Pair/Share (call on inattentive students, after asking a question, having students write down an answer, and having them share their answers with a partner) or One- Minute Paper (call on those students, after asking a question, and students write a one-minute answer)
- Move around the classroom for proximity to inattentive students
- Rotate class seating or re-group students
- Confer with student(s) privately

From your survey

- Issues were on how to interact with these students in the moment:
 - “Student was sleeping in class. After class s/he asked me if they could take the final at a later date because of their course load...”
 - “Two students who knew each other from outside of class would chat loudly during section, in the back row.”

Students reluctant to participate

- Student comes to class, sits in the back of the class near the door, rarely speaks to classmates, and has yet to ask or share information in class. How would you handle this situation?

Things you can do

- Use structured small groups: assign group roles and require group processing
- Randomly select group members to share a summary of group work
- Use Think-Pair-Share and Write-Pair-Share
i.e. asking a question related to the course content and then instructing students to think about (or write) a possible answer, pair up with partners next to them and share their responses

Hostile/oppositional students

- Student seems to have a chip on his/her shoulder. His/ her comments in class often sound either angry or hostile. Even his/her nonverbal behavior seems contentious (looks of contempt, etc.). How would you handle this situation?

Things you can do

- Acknowledge student as an individual (encouraging comments on assignments, confer with student on assignments, respond in a constructive manner, etc.)
- Meet privately with the student and respectfully ask him or her to moderate his or her behavior.
- Listen carefully and respectfully. Then state your position, calmly presenting the issue to entire class, and encourage responses.

From your survey

- Focused on situations in progress and how to diffuse them/exert control over the classroom.
 - “Probably 2 students in my class who mysteriously hated each other & would argue given the chance...”
 - “...argumentative student who as interrupting my explanations. It was interfering with the rest of the discussion and resulted in some other students speaking up to silence the guy.”

Argumentative/heated discussions

- A lively class discussion has turned into an intense argument involving 4-6 students. Hostile and damaging comments are being exchanged. How would you handle this situation?

Things you can do

- Use constructive controversy/structure a debate:
 - Encourage discussion of multiple views
 - Instruct students to debate the opposite view
 - Encourage discussion of multiple views
- List evidence of views on board (T-Chart or Two-Column method or more, representing each view)
- Slow tempo of voice and ask an open-ended question
- Use Rotating Chair technique (speaker summarizes previous statement before sharing their comment)
- Circular Response Discussion (each student shares a comment)

Cheating/dishonesty

- You just discovered a student cheating on an exam in your large lecture class of 150 students. How would you handle this situation?

Things you can do

- Review University's policy [e.g., (Office for Student Conduct and Academic Integrity)]
- Remind class about consequences of cheating (e.g., failing assignment/test, lowering final grade, failing course, etc.)
- To Prevent Cheating:
 - Review policy in syllabus
 - Require multiple drafts of paper
 - Use different forms of the same test or randomized test items

From your survey

- “cheating on quizzes and tests by a student in my first quarter of teaching. No support from professor left me frustrated and I felt the cheating was not something I could stop.
- “2 students turn in a typed homework that’s almost identical and neither really make sense in about the same way.”