

Suggestions for Promoting Civility in the Classroom

- * At the beginning of the course, have students go into small groups and develop their own classroom rules for civil and respectful conduct (e.g., avoid blaming, no attacking, be open to other perspectives, be respectful, avoid being judgmental, use tact in expressing, challenging or confronting views, etc.). These rules can then be added to the syllabus and made reference to should infractions occur. Other rules such as no cell phones, etc., should also be included on the syllabus.
- * Avoid at all costs, participating with students in gossip about other faculty colleagues.
- * When appropriate, do respond to difficult students both publicly in quietly confident ways and also privately to learn the source of the student's difficulty.
- * When meeting with difficult students, spend more time listening to them first and mirror their comments. During these meetings, avoid at all costs getting too angry, emotional or defensive (tell yourself to be calm and focus on keeping your breathing calm--breathing slowly really can work!). Take notes if that keeps you focused and tell the student you want to make sure you want to accurately understand their issues. Don't begin the meeting with a stern lecture at the student. Instead, open the conversation with having them state their issue, then listen, listen, reflect, probe, and then share your side of the story accompanied by the rationale in a calm and open manner. If the situation becomes too heated, ask to reschedule the meeting at a time that would be more suitable.
- * For especially difficult courses (e.g., research or writing), discuss your expectations for student success early on and be clear about how you will support them in meeting your expectations.
- * Consider using midterm course evaluations (or do so even more frequently) and share the feedback with the students to show how you plan to respond to their assessments.
- * Should a student become extremely agitated or make veiled or openly hostile statements, please contact the Dean's office and Public Safety for further assistance.
- * Sandy Rhoten, Dean of Judicial Affairs indicated that faculty have the right to ask a particularly disruptive student to leave the class.
- * If you would like to check out a PBS videoconference entitled, "Faculty on the Front Lines: Reclaiming Civility in the Classroom," let me know. I have a copy from the FDC that is available for checkout.

Finally, below is an excerpt from a chapter in a book for maintaining civility in large classrooms. The author, Mary Deane Sorcinelli (U MA, Amherst), provides some very practical suggestions on dealing with such things as coming in late, talking and other disruptive behavior, inattention and other undesirable activities in large classes. Read on to hear of the suggestions and learn more about the book. Hope this is helpful.

Ellen

-----Original Message-----

From: Rick Reis [mailto:reis@stanford.edu]
Sent: Thursday, November 14, 2002 11:56 AM
To: tomorrows-professor@lists.Stanford.EDU
Subject: TP Msg. #440 PROMOTING CIVILITY IN LARGE CLASSES

"There is peer pressure among students not to confront each other about rude behavior; it is difficult to directly enlist students to reinforce your expectations. An accounting professor uses a subtler tactic. On the first day, she reads excerpts from past student

evaluations that make it clear that rude behavior, especially noise during the lecture, irritates students as much as it does the instructor and that students appreciate when she discourages such behavior."

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Folks:

The posting below gives very practical suggestions on dealing with such things as coming in late, talking and other disruptive behavior, inattention and other undesirable activities in large classes. It is from Chapter 4, Promoting Civility in Large Classes, by Mary Deane Sorcinelli, University of Massachusetts, Amherst in Engaging Large Classes, Strategies and Techniques for College Faculty by Christine A. Stanley, Texas A&M University and M. Erin Porter, University of Texas, Austin, Editors. . Published by Anker Publishing Company, Inc., Boston, Massachusetts <http://www.ankerpub.com/>. Copyright © 2002 by Anker Publishing Company, Inc. All rights reserved.

Regards,

Rick Reis
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UP NEXT: Coping With Hitchhikers and Couch Potatoes on Teams

Tomorrow's Teaching and Learning

----- 1,233 words

PROMOTING CIVILITY IN LARGE CLASSES

Mary Deane Sorcinelli
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Some Solutions for Dealing with Misbehavior in the Large Class

Ideally, creating an atmosphere that is conducive to positive, respectful behavior should allow instructors to work smoothly with all students. However, instructors may still run into some students or classes that present problems. Beyond notes in syllabi, instructors need to take a sensible stance on student misbehavior in terms of identifying it, responding to it, and doing so reasonably and consistently. The suggestions offered below address the behaviors that faculty report as most irritating and troublesome. There are several excellent resources to consult when confronted with more serious breaches of classroom conduct; for example, cheating, physical intimidation, harassment, drug or alcohol abuse (Amada, 1999; Dannells, 1997; McKeachie, 1999; Richardson, 1999).

Talking and Inattention

If students are chatting, make direct eye contact with them so that they know you see them. Sometimes stopping the lecture, looking directly at the students, and resuming the lecture when you have full attention is enough to resolve the problem.

Physically move to that part of the room, again making eye contact with the students. Often stepping into student space gets the message across.

Direct a question to the area in which the chatting students are sitting. This focuses attention to that area of the class but avoids confrontations or putting anybody on the spot.

Call the offending student or students up after class. Students usually appreciate a private reminder rather than public embarrassment. Tell students who talk in class (or read the newspaper, etc.) that their behavior distracts you and the other students, and ask them please to refrain.

There is peer pressure among students not to confront each other about rude behavior; it is difficult to directly enlist students to reinforce your expectations. An accounting professor uses a subtler tactic. On the first day, she reads excerpts from past student evaluations that make it clear that rude behavior, especially noise during the lecture, irritates students as much as it does the instructor and that students appreciate when she discourages such behavior.

Arriving Late and Leaving Early

Establish an understanding with students: You expect them to come to class on time; in return, you will start and finish as scheduled.

Institute a starting ritual: moving to the podium, dimming the lights, playing music, raising your hand, reading a notable quotation or passage-whatever suits your teaching style.

Require students to inform you if they need to arrive late or leave early, either verbally or in writing. Some instructors reserve a section in the front or back, near an exit, where such students can sit so that their arrival or departure causes as little disruption as possible.

Station your TAs along the back of the classroom, and if students arrive or leave early, have them ask students if they are okay, why they are leaving, etc.

Use the last five minutes in class in ways that circumvent the temptation for students to pack up early. A biology teacher put a multiple choice or short answer question on the overhead projector during the last few minutes of each class. The question gets at the heart of the concluding lecture or previews the next lecture and the students know that they will see some variation of this question on the exam.

Let students know that there are costs for arriving late or missing class. Don't teach class twice-make students responsible for getting missed assignments and material.

Inattendance

Many instructors of large classes leave the question of attendance up to individual students. If you require attendance, be sure to have a system for reliably recording it, such as collecting homework, an in-class assignment, or a quiz at the end of class.

* A psychology professor divides the lecture hall and assigns TAs and their student discussion sections to specific areas. He asks TAs to note empty seats and follow up on those who are excessively absent.

* A professor in accounting builds into class ten unannounced, short, extra credit writing assignments that essentially reward students for attending class. Roughly once a week, he shows a segment of video, poses an open-ended question on the overhead, etc., and asks students to respond from what they've learned in lecture and through personal experience. To ease the burden of grading, he scans the assignments, evaluates them with a check (or a zero for an absent student), and figures them toward the total grade.

* If a large percentage of students don't come to class, consider the possibility that they do not find sessions useful or that notes on the Internet or sold by companies inadvertently signal that attending class is not important. Make sure not only that the material covered in class is vital to students' mastery of the subject and their performance on tests and papers, but also that students understand the connection.

* On the day you give a test (attendance should be high), ask students to write on a piece of paper the reasons why they are not attending classes regularly.

Deadlines

* Clearly state your policy on missed exams, make-up exams, late homework, writing assignments, written university-sanctioned excuses, etc., in writing and orally at the beginning of the semester. Periodically remind students of such policies in advance of deadlines.

* Make it clear to students that there are logical consequences if they turn in assignments late. If the policy is not to accept late papers, then don't accept them except under the most extraordinary circumstances - and then in private. Always document the rationale for a change in policy should your decision be challenged by a third party.

* Regularly meet deadlines. If you say tests will be graded and returned Friday, then get them back on Friday.

Challenges to Authority

At some point in the large class, most teachers will have to face a student who is resentful, hostile, or challenging. The following are a few suggestions for gaining the cooperation of an oppositional student.

* As a rule of thumb, avoid arguments with students during class. If

a student continues to press, table the discussion until later and then continue it with the student privately, in a more neutral setting. Listen carefully, openly, and calmly to the grievance. Sometimes the opportunity to ventilate and express a felt grievance may be more important to a student than is a resolution.

* When talking to a disruptive student, tell the student that you value his or her good contributions, but point out how the behavior that he or she is engaging in negatively affects you when you are teaching. Try to enlist the student's cooperation in setting ground rules for acceptable behavior.

* Don't become defensive and take a confrontation personally. Respond honestly to challenges, explaining - not defending - your instructional objectives and how assignments and exercises contribute to them. Although the purpose of class activities and lectures may be obvious to you, students often need to have these objectives made explicit.

* If the behavior is reoccurring, you may want to write a letter to the student. Describe the behavior, indicate how it disrupts you and other students, restate your expectations for behavior, and outline specific changes you would like to see. Copy the letter to the student's academic advisor or to the dean of students.

* On the rare occasion that a student is alarmingly hostile or threatening, contact the ombudsman's or the dean of student's office. Most campuses have disciplinary procedures that protect faculty as well as students.

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