

CENTER FOR TEACHING

Encouraging Civil Behavior in Large Classes

Essays on Teaching Excellence
Toward the Best in the Academy

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For two years I was part of a bi-monthly, cross-disciplinary seminar with twenty tenured professors who taught large, lower-division lectures ranging in size from 100 to 500 students. Our goal, supported by a grant from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, was to improve general education courses at our University. Early on in our meetings, a desire to share strategies for managing student behavior in large lecture classes surfaced. This topic appears to be a shared concern among college teachers on many campuses, as demonstrated by the increasing advice in higher education publications on "troublesome behaviors," "incivility," and "misconduct" (Amada, 1999; Richardson, 1999). This essay looks specifically at issues of civility in the large lecture classroom, and offers some preventative measures and practical advice.

Creating a Constructive Classroom Climate

When disruptive behavior occurs in our classes, we can be sure of two things. First, we must do something. The longer inappropriate behavior continues, the more acceptable it becomes and the more difficult it is to stop. Second, it is easier to prevent disruptive behaviors than to deal with them after the fact. Establishing a positive climate and expectations for large class learning can avert many problems. The following are four groups of specific strategies that teachers can use to guide their efforts in creating constructive large class environments (Sorcinelli, 2002).

Define Expectations at the Outset. The importance of establishing norms and setting expectations for a class at the outset cannot be overstated. 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 behavior.

- *Use the first class to welcome students and clearly articulate your expectations of behavior.*
- *Create a clear, informative syllabus to reduce student uncertainty about appropriate behavior.*
- *Let students help shape policies for classroom behavior within prescribed limits.*
- *Post syllabus, course content, and civility guidelines/links on your course Web site.*

Decrease Anonymity. When students have personal relationships with the teacher as well as their peers, civility can come more easily. The following are some practical ways to reduce anonymity in large classes.

- *Provide as much personal access as possible (e.g., arrive early to class, stay later, schedule office hours immediately after class, visit labs or discussion sections).*
- *Use technology to get to know students (e.g., email them, respond to their emails, survey the class).*

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

- *Give short in-class writing exercises to stimulate thought; pair students to discuss questions, accomplish specific tasks, or share responses.*
- *Assign active learning exercises on- or off-line to increase preparedness for class and to enhance learning (e.g., pre-lecture assignments, questions about readings, CD simulations, post-lecture quizzes).*

Examine Your Behavior and Seek Feedback from Students. When faced with inappropriate deportment, examine your own behavior. Surveys of students' "pet peeves about teaching" reveal that many are concerned about lecturing behaviors, including poor organization, visuals, pacing, and use of class time. Other complaints include talking down to students, being unhelpful or unapproachable, and employing confusing testing and grading practices (Perlman & McCann, 1998).

- *Ask students for help in determining what is and isn't working by administering an informal course evaluation early in the semester and discussing key results with class.*

Some Solutions for Dealing with Misbehavior

Clearly, prevention is preferable to remediation. However, instructors may still run into some students or classes that present problems. The suggestions below address 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, harassment, drug or alcohol abuse (Amada, 1999; McKeachie, 1999; Richardson, 1999).

Talking and Inattention

- *If students are chatting, make direct eye contact so that they know you see them, physically move to that part of the room, and/or direct a question to the area in which chatting students are sitting.*
- *Call the offending student(s) up after class, addressing the problem within earshot of others but not publicly embarrassing them.*
- *Make it clear that rude behavior irritates students as much as it does you.*

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.*
- *Station your TAs in the back of the classroom and have them ask late or early-departing students if they are ok, why they are leaving, etc.*
- *Institute a starting ritual: dim the lights, play music, read a notable quotation -whatever suits your teaching style.*
- *Circumvent the temptation to pack up early. Use the last five minutes of class to put a question on the overhead that gets at the heart of your lecture and/or will appear on the next exam.*

Poor Attendance

- *Make sure that the material covered in class is vital to students' mastery of the subject and that students understand the connection.*
- *Use short in-class "extra credit" assignments that essentially reward students for attending class.*
- *Assign each TA to a section of students -ask TAs to note empty seats and follow up on students who are excessively absent.*

Ignoring Deadlines

- *Clearly state your policy on missed or late work in writing and verbally at the beginning of the semester. Periodically remind students of such policies .*
- *If your policy is not to accept late papers, then don't accept them, except under the most extraordinary circumstances, and then in private.*
- *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 large classes, many teachers will 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 and continue it in a more neutral setting, preferably in the presence of others..*
- *Respond honestly to challenges, explaining -not defending- your instructional objectives and how assignments contribute to them.*
- *If the behavior reoccurs, document it. 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. Copy the letter to your department chair as well as the student's academic advisor or the dean of students.*
- *On the rare occasion that a student is alarmingly hostile or threatening, contact the ombudsperson, dean of student's office, and/or campus police.*

Conclusion

For most instructors, teaching the large lecture is one of the most challenging of classroom assignments. Although we have expertise in our content areas, we often have little training to manage such large numbers of students. Paramount to establishing a positive large class environment and deterring disruptive behavior is to let students know your expectations from the outset and hold them to those expectations. Perhaps most importantly, as instructors we need to consider our own behavior as well as that of our students. An honest attempt to understand how our classroom deportment might contribute to a difficult situation may help to reduce incivilities in our classrooms.

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