

Addressing Students' Needs: Common Disruptive Student Behaviors and Possible Responses

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The following are examples of student behaviors that have the potential to disrupt class or successful learning, along with several possible responses.

Rambling

- Refocus students' attention by restating a relevant point.
- Direct questions to a group that is back on the subject.
- Ask how the topic relates to the current topic being discussed.
- Use visual aids, begin to write on the board, turn on an overhead projector.
- Say: "Would you summarize your main point please?" or "Are you asking...?"

Shyness or Silence

- Change your teaching strategies from group discussion to individual written exercises.
- Give strong positive reinforcement for any contribution.
- Involve the shy student by directly asking him/her a question.
- Make eye contact with the student.
- Appoint the student to be small group leader.

Talkativeness

- Acknowledge the comments.
- Give the student limited time to express his or her viewpoint or feelings, and then move on.
- Make eye contact with another participant, and move toward that person.
- Give the person individual attention during breaks.
- Say: "That's an interesting point. Now let's see what other people think."

Sharp-shooting

- Admit that you do not know the answer and redirect the question to the group or the individual who asked it.
- Acknowledge that this is a joint learning experience.
- Ignore the behavior.

Heckling/Arguing

- Redirect the question to group or supportive individuals.
- Recognize the participant's feelings and move on.
- Acknowledge positive points.
- Say: "I appreciate your comments, but I'd like to hear from others," or "It looks like we disagree."

Grandstanding

- Say: "You are entitled to your opinion, belief or feelings, but now it's time we moved on to the next subject," or "Can you restate that as a question?" or "We'd like to hear more about that if there is time after the presentation."

Overt Hostility/Resistance

- Hostility can be a mask for fear. Reframe hostility as fear to depersonalize it.
- Respond to the fear, not the hostility.
- Remain calm and polite. Keep your temper in check.
- Don't disagree, but build on or around what has been said.
- Move closer to the hostile person; maintain eye contact.
- Always allow the student a face-saving retreat from the confrontation.
- Say: "You seem really angry. Does anyone else feel this way?"
- Allow the individual to solve the problem being addressed. He or she may not be able to offer solutions, and will sometimes undermine his or her own position.
- Talk to the student privately during a break.
- As a last resort, privately ask the individual to leave class for the good of the group.

Griping

- Point out that you can't change the policy.
- Validate the student's point.
- Indicate that you'll discuss the problem with the participant privately.
- Indicate time pressure.

Side Conversations

- Don't embarrass the talkers.
- Ask their opinion on the topic being discussed.
- Ask the talkers if they would like to share their ideas.
- Casually move toward those talking.
- Make eye contact with them.
- Comment on the group (but don't look at them individually).
- Standing near the talkers, ask a nearby participant a question so that the new discussion is near the talkers.
- As a last resort, stop and wait.

Classroom Management of Specific Behaviors

Adapted and modified from Lisa Rodriguez, Ph.D.
<http://www.4faculty.org/includes/108r2.jsp>

Issue	Solution
1. Undermining the instructor's authority	A student might engage in a battle of the wills with the instructor. This student would need to be privately told that their attitude was confrontational and asked how this might be resolved mutually. <i>"Be careful not to read most questions about content, interpretation, or assignments as a challenge of authority. Acting as if they are <u>not</u>, even when you suspect they are, can convey a sense of confidence and control. Sometimes merely assuring the student, while smiling, that you have indeed reflected on this issue at length and that they too will understand soon why the information or the assignment is valuable diffuses the situation. You may even want to encourage them to ask the question again at a later date if necessary."</i>
2. Leaving class too frequently	You might privately ask the student if everything is OK so that they know that you are concerned by their behavior. Don't assume disrespect – it might be a bladder infection or some other physical problem.
3. "Spacing Out" or Sitting With Back to Instructor	Students need to know that their non-verbal behavior is perceived as disinterest. You might ask them after class if they need a more comfortable seat. Some students are extremely shy and it might take half of the semester before they open up enough to make sustained eye contact or face the instructor completely. Remember also that sustained eye contact is a culturally dictated practice that might not be feasible for some students.
4. Verbal or physical threats	As a general rule consult professional experts for assistance immediately.
5. Gum, Food, Pagers, and Cell Phone Disruption	Consequences for breaking this policy might range from the loss of participation points to the offender having to present on a topic of interest to the class. The idea here is to prevent habitual disruption from gum popping and phones ringing.
6. Monopolizing Discussions	Many students are excited and talkative so it might be good to give them a few class periods to settle in. You might approach them initially by saying that you are pleased with the amount of enthusiasm they have for discussion but were hoping that they have suggestions for getting the other class members equally involved.
7. Sleeping in class	Sleeping in class is usually considered rude. Most faculty believe it should not be tolerated and is best curbed up front by waking a sleeping student and asking them to step outside with you. Once there faculty often tell students that it's best for the rest of the class if they return when they are awake enough to be an active participant. This occurs from time to time and you obviously are the one to choose lenience or punitive action. If it's one of your more regularly involved students, perhaps give them an option of an extra credit research assignment they can bring to your next class period covering the subject matter they missed while they were sleeping. An alternative approach is to assume that the student does not feel well, was up most of the night with a sick child, or has some other condition that results in sleepiness when still for long periods of time. You might simply choose to wake the student and ask them if they are feeling alright. To pull this off you need to approach it with true concern for the student's health and well-being. Most of the

	<p>time, students are so embarrassed and so appreciative of your genuine concern that they don't let it happen again.</p> <p>Encourage students to actively participate, take notes (explain that this is helpful to their learning as it stimulates memory in the brain) and in particularly long classes break up the session with activities or paired conversations about a topic to ensure that students stay engaged. Students don't learn much from listening, so remember that the more they "experience" the learning process the more you are really teaching.</p>
8. Repeated Tardiness:	There should be clear parameters set around this issue up front – either in your syllabus or in the class decided norms. Stick to your guns on the policy. Some fair policies might include 3 tardies equals one absence.
9. Refusal to Participate or Speak	We cannot force students to speak in class nor participate in group projects. This can be addressed and become a win-win situation by either giving the student alternative options to verbal participation (unless it's a speech class) or simply carefully coaxing some response out of them and praising whatever minimal effort you receive from them. Remember, some students are terrified to be in a class setting –especially if there are round tables rather than desks – allowing for little anonymity.
10. Sexual Innuendo, Flirting, or Other Inappropriate Suggestion	This behavior should be curbed as soon as it occurs. It's never comfortable to tell a student that they aren't being appropriate and if you are uncomfortable, a short, positive e-mail or phone call might suffice. Your response should be not judgmental and you might discuss it with your department chair or faculty mentor before broaching it with your student.
11. Disrespectful Behavior	The reality is that sometimes students just plain won't like you. You will find yourself in a conversation with yourself about why they don't like you and treat you with disrespect. Animosity will perpetuate itself so remember your role and look for a way to positively invite the student to engage more deeply in the class.