

Understanding & Managing Student Challenges in the Classroom

The classroom is a place for learning, free exchange of ideas, and for students (and faculty) to challenge how they know what they know. As is the case with so many things, the idyllic and the realistic don't always meet. Sometimes students can be less than cooperative. Where does this lack of cooperation cross the line to the disruptive? What prompts the disruptive student to upset the classroom? There can be many reasons for the disturbance. This paper will attempt to help faculty explore the root causes of disruption and offer means to create a civil space for discourse.

First and foremost, however, when faculty at Boise State University sense a student in need, the appropriate course of action is to activate the SOS system through the [Health Services website](#). This notifies appropriate personnel on campus that a student may be in distress.

All students experience stress during their college careers, though stress may manifest itself in many ways and student reaction to stress may take many forms. The Counseling Center at University of California at Santa Barbara has developed a [website](#) that helps faculty and students understand the root of the challenges and provides several action items faculty may do and several other actions faculty should avoid. The most common challenges ¹appear below:

Student Challenges

Academic or Career Related Concerns: It may be that students have difficulty getting into a section of a course and insist on “sitting in” until the issue is resolved. It may be that students are failing a course required for their major and see their anticipated career slipping away. Late career students may find that applications to graduate school are being rejected.

Instructor Actions: Help the student see that you understand his/her dilemma. Direct the student to the appropriate department: A) [Registrar's Office](#), [BroncoWeb](#), or [Academic Advising](#) for challenges with enrollment; B) Instructor of the course or a tutoring center in the curricular area if a student is failing a course/ is in need of tutoring; C) Academic Advisor in the discipline if the student is challenged to get into grad school.

Aggression or Potential Violence: Some students may pose a threat to themselves or others. These situations, when you believe violence to anyone may be eminent, must be handled with care. Aggressive behavior may be verbal or physical. “Some of the indicators of being violence-prone are an unstable school or vocational history; a history of juvenile violence and/or

¹ Retrieved March 1, 2010 from the University of California at Santa Barbara:
<http://www.sa.ucsb.edu/distressedstudentsguide/index.aspx>

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substance abuse; prior history of family violence or abuse; fascination with weapons; a pattern of cruelty to animals as a child or adolescent; and an inability to control aggressive impulses.”²

Instructor Actions:

- A) Determine if you feel safe in this environment. If not (and when possible), remove yourself and others from the scene and dial 911 immediately. If the student removes him/herself from the situation, ensure the door is closed (and locked when easily accomplished) and then dial 911. Report the situation to SOS and your department chair.
- B) Remain calm (or at least have the appearance of calmness). Ask the student to lower his/her voice and to make an appointment to see you once the anger has subsided. When this meeting occurs, ask another faculty member to sit in on the meeting – perhaps have the meeting in the department chair’s office.
- C) Contact Student Affairs – [Blaine Eckles](#) to report the problem. Make sure you have discussed the situation with your department chair as well.

Don’t:

- A) Remain in an area where you feel unsafe.
- B) Allow the situation to develop into a screaming match.
- C) Assume the situation will resolve itself over time.
- D) Touch or invade a student’s personal space.
- E) Meet alone with the student – and especially not in an office with a closed door.

Irrational or Inappropriate Behavior: Many of our students break away from social norms during the college years. Some students, however, create an alternate reality and thereby don’t seem to believe classroom norms apply to them. This person “demonstrates a gross impairment in reality testing. Some of the features of being out of touch with reality are disorganized speech; disorganized behavior; increase in odd or eccentric behavior; inappropriate or no expression of emotion; expression of erroneous beliefs that usually involve a misinterpretation of reality; expression of bizarre thoughts that could involve visual or auditory hallucinations; withdrawal from social interactions; an inability to connect with people, and an inability to track and process thoughts that are based in reality.”³

Instructor Actions:

- A) Ask student if you may walk him/her to the Health and Wellness facility (2nd floor of the Norco Building). Ask an administrative assistant to call ahead and let them know you’re on your way.
- B) Speak to the student in concrete terms
- C) Realize the student may not comprehend everything you say.

² Retrieved March 1, 2010 from the University of California at Santa Barbara:
<http://www.sa.ucsb.edu/distressedstudentsguide/CommonProblems/aggressionviolence.aspx>

³ Retrieved March 1, 2010 from the University of California at Santa Barbara:
<http://www.sa.ucsb.edu/distressedstudentsguide/CommonProblems/irrationalbehavior.aspx>

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- D) Check with the Disabilities Resource Center to see if behavior is consistent with a known disability.

Don't:

- A) Attempt to rationalize with the student.
- B) Agitate the student – remain flexible in getting the student help.
- C) Chase a student who decides to flee – call 911 instead.

Suicide: the second leading cause of death for college students is a serious condition and must receive an appropriate response. “Suicidal persons tend to give clues to those around them. Approximately eighty percent of people who have attempted suicide discussed their intent to do so with someone around them. The initiation of a suicidal event is likely to be triggered by a major life stress such as a loss or threat of loss (e.g., death of family/friend, end of a significant relationship, flunking out of school).”⁴

Instructor Actions:

- A) When possible, see the student in private
- B) Take the student seriously and encourage him/her to walk with you to the Counseling Center (Norco Building 2nd floor)
- C) Show care and concern while remaining in control of the situation

Don't:

- A) Minimize the situation
- B) Argue with the student about reasons for suicide
- C) Hesitate to ask student about intentions – especially once s/he leaves your presence
- D) Agree to maintain confidentiality about this situation
- E) Allow a student to manage the situation or walk student to the Counseling Center

Boise State Policies and Papers Regarding Disruptive Students

- [Statement of Shared Values](#)
- [Boise State's "Classroom Disruption Policy" – Policy 2050](#)
 - Faculty may dismiss students for up to 2 class periods
 - Removal for the remainder of the semester must go through the academic dean
- [Academic Dishonesty Process & Form](#)
 - Faculty may sanction up to an “F” in the course for academic dishonesty
 - Keep written records of events and work
- [Student Mediation Program](#)

⁴ Retrieved on March 1, 2010 from the University of California at Santa Barbara:
<http://www.sa.ucsb.edu/distressedstudentsguide/CommonProblems/suicide.aspx>

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Ways to Promote Positive Classroom Interactions

- 1. Believe your students are in your class to learn.** The instructor's attitude about teaching and her students profoundly affects that way she approaches the classroom. If the initial assumption is that all students present can and want to learn (which doesn't necessarily mean have all necessary prerequisite knowledge), the instructor makes subtle and not-so-subtle changes to how each class period is structured, the means of interacting with the material, and expectations for student achievement.
- 2. Seek ways to engage students in the material.** Lecture can be an effective method of student learning, however there are many other effective methods of teaching. If the goal is to engage the student – perhaps working like an expert in the field does, then lecture or active learning, or case studies, etc. can only be part of the teaching/learning picture. Lectures are very efficient means of sharing information, processes, etc., but rarely help the student apply knowledge – at least in the classroom setting. This is not always the case, however. Some outstanding lecturers speak for short periods of time, and then ask students to engage in some activity (sometimes reviewing notes looking for misunderstandings or bits of information that don't seem to mesh) with an opportunity to share that with others in the class or the professor. Active learning is very engaging, but the specific technique selected needs to have a strong correlation to the expected outcome. Active learning techniques like case studies, problem based learning, discovery learning, etc., help students internalize the underlying concepts which tends to lead to enduring understandings. We've all heard of (and perhaps experienced) binge and purge learning – cram for a test and immediately forget 80-90% of the material. Binge/purge cycles aren't good for our bodies, and they aren't good for learning. Engaging students in learning can help your students break that cycle.
- 3. Make and enforce a policy to discuss personal issues (disagreement about test/paper grades, special requirements for seating, etc.) in private.** As the instructor, we manage many aspects of the classroom climate. One important aspect is determining which conversations are appropriate for the entire class and which issues are better discussed individually. Consider a policy for your course that clearly separates the boundary – and be sure to enforce that policy. When asked a question that may or may not be appropriate for a full class discussion, tell your student asking the question that you'd be happy to discuss that topic during office hours. If the two of you discover that it is a topic for the full class, you will address it in the next class period. Situations can easily and quickly escalate when they have an emotional aspect. For instance, a student who fails a test may want to air her disagreement over a specific question in class. One way to avoid this is to pass tests back the last 5 minutes of a class period (especially when you have students who are emotionally tied to their grades) and offer to stay to speak with anyone who has questions.
- 4. Use the Shared Values Statement (<http://www.boisestate.edu/osrr/Forms/8.5X11%20color.pdf>).** This might mean that very early in the semester (maybe even the first day of a discussion-

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based course) students and instructor consider the shared values found in the statement. Talk about how that might play out in your classroom and what everyone will have to do in order to uphold these values. Discuss how often the best discussions happen not on a surface level, rather only when we begin to unpack deeply held beliefs.⁵ Very frequently those deeply held beliefs will have a strong emotional element. It's easy to be civil to one another when we're talking about the weather, but when we begin to explore the roots of racism, sexism (name any ism), religion, politics, etc., civil discourse may be more challenging. You might look at some YouTube video or at a news story and begin to explore the comments – which of them are civil and seek to unpack the issue and which remain surface level and function better as discussion stoppers than starters? How can this impact what you and your students do and say during an emotional discussion?

- 6. Attempt to learn your student's names.** This may seem like such a simple suggestion (or something outrageous if you're teaching 300 students). Psychologically, though, it is very important. When we believe an instructor knows who we are and cares enough to learn our names, we are more likely to attend class, engage in activities, and, consequently, score higher on exams⁶. Even an attempt to learn names can make a difference – because it shows that seeing each student as an individual is important to the instructor. Learning and using students' names also reduces disruptive/uncivil behavior in a classroom. The theory behind this suggests that we feel more accountable when we are known by the authority figure in the classroom. There are many techniques for learning names (footnote 1 also provides links to those ideas). With so many options, you're bound to find one that works for you.
- 5. Feedback is our friend.** Ideally, feedback travels in two directions. Instructors seek feedback from students regarding what they understood from the material presented in any given class period. There are many ways of doing this, but Classroom Assessment Techniques is a great place to start. CATs help the instructor determine what was actually learned so they can adjust the approach for the next class period. Additionally, students need both constructive criticism on their work. The best instructors identify the things that are done well more frequently than what needs to be fixed – though both aspects are important to share. The best college teachers are able to identify the underlying challenge the student demonstrates in a paper – so instead of picking apart every error, the instructor makes one general comment with a few examples cited. Students who want to improve can use the generalization to fix the underlying problem (consequently fixing all the small, yet possible frequent errors in a paper).

⁵ An excellent resource for this is found at Harvard's Derek Bok Center:
<http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/html/icb.topic58474/hotmoments.html>

⁶ See <http://www.ntlf.com/html/lib/bib/names.htm>