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Managing Disruptive Behaviour in the Classroom
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Abstract

Both faculty and students at many colleges and universities report numerous incidents of disruptive and uncivil behaviour. However, studies show that faculty are often reluctant to confront these situations, or they feel ill-equipped to intervene. If the behaviour escalates, a disproportionate amount of time and effort can be spent trying to manage a volatile classroom environment, generating a negative experience for both faculty and students. This article presents strategies for preventing and managing disruptive behaviour in the college classroom. Drawing from theory and research in communication and group dynamics, specific methods for intervening are outlined.

Both faculty and students at many colleges and universities report numerous incidents of disruptive and uncivil behaviour (Bjorkland & Rehling, 2010; Seeman, 2010; Clark & Springer, 2007).

However, studies show that many professors avoid directly confronting these problematic student behaviours (Bjorkland & Rehling, 2010; Clark & Springer, 2007; McPherson & Liang, 2007). There are several reasons for avoiding confrontation. First, faculty may hope that if they ignore the behaviour, it will disappear. However, this may be wishful thinking; more often the behaviour escalates (Clark & Springer, 2007; McCrosky, Richmond & McCroskey, 2006). A second reason faculty may not confront disruptive behaviour is that they fear the administration will not support them. In response to this concern many universities are developing specific programs for disruptive student behaviour and hiring administrative staff who specialize in mediating faculty-student conflicts (Hernandez & Fister, 2001). A third reason that faculty may be reluctant to address disruptive behaviour is that they fear that the occurrence of these incidents in their classroom somehow reflects negatively on their teaching. While some faculty do seem to be more skilled at creating productive, congenial classroom environments, the ubiquitous presence of disruptive student behaviours argues against the charge that the faculty are to blame. Research on group dynamics affirms the universal nature of difficult behaviour in groups, pointing to the need to both expect challenges to those in leadership roles and learn to deal with them in a skilful way (Wilson, 2005). A final concern of some faculty coping with disruptive behaviour is the fear that if they confront the behaviour, the student will retaliate in ways that may threaten their careers or even cause physical danger (Amada, 1992). Unfortunately, in rare cases, these risks can be real. However, both faculty and students have the right to enjoy a respectful, inviting learning environment, and a few unruly students should not be allowed to dominate the classroom experience.

Why is it important to confront disruptive behaviour in the classroom? In addition to the obvious concerns about student learning there is evidence to suggest that disruptive behaviour causes student dissatisfaction with their college experience, and it may even adversely influence retention (Siedman, 2005). There are many definitions of disruptive behaviour, but students tend to know it when they see

it, and they do report frustration with faculty who allow it to continue (McPherson & Liang, 2007). For the purpose of this discussion, disruptive student behaviour is defined as any student whose behaviour is disrespectful, annoying or distracting, wastes class time, or generates negative attitudes toward the course or instructor.

This article presents a number of strategies for preventing and managing disruptive behaviour in the classroom, based on insights from theories and research on communication and group dynamics. Specific communication skills for defusing conflict and redirecting behaviour will be presented.

Strategies for Managing Disruptive Behaviour

1. **Establish a confident, dominant leadership style.**

First impressions count. Beginning with the first day of class, instructors should establish themselves as leaders who are organized, prepared, capable, and ready to take charge. This may mean allocating extra time to prepare for the first day of class to avoid feeling rushed or off balance. Managing challenges to class policies discussed on the first day in a respectful, yet firm tone will convey the message that limits will be set consistently throughout the semester. It is far easier to set strict guidelines and ease them over time, as exceptions arise, than to attempt to enforce new limits once the class has already spun out of control.

2. **Engage students in a relaxed class atmosphere.**

The best instructors have a balance between authoritative and nurturing leadership styles. Put differently, group leaders have both task functions (moving the group through the material in an efficient way that promotes learning and mastery) and maintenance functions (attending to the needs of group members by reducing unnecessary anxiety, responding to concerns, and buffering conflict through the use of humour and other strategies) (Wilson, 2005). Using an icebreaker on the first day of class can go a long way toward creating a relaxed classroom environment. Icebreakers done in small groups can set the stage for a collegial atmosphere where all students feel included, especially if the exercise is something that engenders laughter and allows students to see their commonalities.

3. **Deflect power struggles.**

One of the most important aspects of a productive classroom environment is a healthy exchange of different viewpoints. Professors should expect and embrace conflicting ideas in response to their teaching. However, some students can become entrenched in the role of naysayer, questioning the most basic course assumptions and pointing out exceptions to research findings. Unlike students who enjoy debating ideas to enhance critical thinking about the topic, naysayers seem to engage in a subtle, but continuous wrestling match that drains the teacher's energy and creates a negative classroom environment (Deering & Shaw, 1997).

One way to defuse this kind of power struggle is to turn the argument back onto the classroom. Simply ask the students, "What do you all think about this issue?" Students typically will either speak up to support the teacher's empirically supported viewpoint or insist that the argument has been going on too long and should be dropped.

4. **Don't argue with critics.**

Communication experts Adler & Rodman (2008) point out that criticism is inevitable for anyone in leadership positions, and responding non-defensively is an important interpersonal skill. A

basic law of assertiveness training is that aggression leads to aggression. Responding to criticism from students by making counterattacks (e.g., “Well if you had studied harder, you would have done better on this test!”) only breeds anger and prolongs the argument.

An effective technique for disarming critics is to agree with any element of their statement that contains truth (e.g., “This was a hard test, and it did contain a lot of material from the reading that we didn’t have time to go over in class.”) There is usually at least a kernel of truth in any criticism. When teachers respond to criticism by agreeing with the students, it often takes them by surprise, since they are expecting an argument. As the saying goes, it takes two to tango. If the professor does not argue, there is no way to sustain the conflict.

5. Use the broken record technique.

Setting limits is a crucial part of any professor’s job. Faculty have the right to set standards for their courses, and to create norms for classroom behaviour (Rosenblum, 2006). As long as they are up front about the expectations, students can opt out of the course if they disagree with the requirements, particularly if these policies are stated in the syllabi. For example, some faculty do not allow students to use laptop computers in their classes. Students’ use of technology during class is now one of the most frequently cited forms of disruptive behaviour in college classes (Burns & Lohenry, 2010; Young, 2006), because it creates a temptation for students to surf the internet and check their email. This is a distraction, not just for the student using the computer, but for other students who can see the screen. Most students are willing to go along with a no laptop policy, but a few students may flatly disagree and sometimes they don’t want to take no for an answer.

The broken record technique works well for responding to students who argue with limits (Canter, 2009). It starts with saying no, followed by a brief reason. Giving a reason for the policy communicates thought and concern for the learning environment. However, it is unnecessary to give lengthy explanations. If a list of reasons is given, students may react by citing a counterargument for each one, and the conflict will be prolonged. After the initial reason for the policy is stated, the broken record technique involves simply choosing a short phrase and calmly repeating it each time the student argues back. The key is to maintain a calm, matter-of-fact tone of voice.

6. Do a perception check.

Sometimes students can be disruptive simply by displaying nonverbal behaviours aimed at the instructor that communicate disapproval, such as making faces, rolling their eyes, or shaking their heads. This can be a form of passive aggressive behaviour intended to challenge the teacher and shake his/her confidence. However, sometimes students are not even aware that they are engaging in these behaviours, and other times these reactions are not even directed toward us. If these behaviours are one-time reactions, they are probably best ignored, but if they persist and cause the professor to be distracted and annoyed, it’s time to confront them. A good technique for inquiring about problematic nonverbal behaviours is to do a perception check (Adler & Rodman, 2008). This technique has three steps: 1) describe the behaviour in neutral, objective terms (e.g., “Mary, I noticed that you were shaking your head in class today.”); 2) give two different interpretations of the behaviour, one of which should be benign (“I was thinking maybe you objected to what I was saying, or maybe you had your mind on something else.”); 3) ask for feedback, (“Can you tell me what was going on?”).

This technique is effective because it asks the student to explain the behaviour without jumping to conclusions about his/her motives. By posing two different possible reasons for the

behaviour, the professor communicates curiosity rather than accusation. This technique can be very effective in generating a non-defensive response from students. In most cases, the students will admit to being unhappy about something going on in class, and the problem can be cleared up. However, if the student is really attempting to be passive-aggressive, he/she may deny the behaviour and claim that the professor is imagining things. Even if this happens, the student now knows that the professor is not afraid to call him/her on the behaviour, and the reactions usually become less frequent. Of course, it's best to confront these kinds of situations in private after class, to avoid embarrassing the student and increasing defensiveness.

In some instances, students will reveal that their reactions were completely unrelated to what the professor was saying or doing. For example, in response to a perception-check, one student became tearful and reported that the reason she was shaking her head in class was that while she was at work in a prison that day, one of the guards was stabbed, and she was reliving the incident, thinking about how it could have been avoided.

7. Interrupt monopolisers.

Most classes have one or two students who are compulsive talkers (McCroskey, Richmond, & McCroskey, 2006). While the professor's goal is usually to increase class participation, when particular students continually dominate the class discussions they begin to alienate their peers. Students tend to view compulsive talkers as self-centered, insensitive to the needs of the class, or attempting to be the teacher's pet.

One way to tell whether or not a student is viewed as a monopoliser is to scan the room when the student begins talking and notice whether other students are rolling their eyes, looking down, or showing other signs of annoyance. If this happens, it is the professor's job to interrupt the student. Faculty may assume that interrupting people is rude; however, it can be argued that interrupting is the professor's job to keep the discussion moving. Studies show that students expect professors to intervene with compulsive talkers, and they may view those who don't as incompetent or apathetic about the classroom environment (McPherson & Liang, 2007). At the same time, students expect professors to manage these situations in a calm, respectful way, without public humiliation (McPherson & Laing, 2007).

A good way to interrupt monopolisers is to make a face saving statement, followed by an invitation for others to talk (e.g., "Mary, you are making a good point, and I'm wondering what other people think about this issue.") Some students may not pick up on this hint that they are dominating the class discussion, and some may even believe that they can't control their need to communicate. For those students, it may be necessary to take them aside after class and develop a behavioural plan. Faculty can tell students that they plan not to call on them when they raise their hands because they want to encourage others to participate. In some cases it may be helpful to agree upon a certain number of comments per hour that will be allowed.

Keep in mind that studies of group dynamics note the ubiquitous presence of monopolisers in all kinds of groups. These individuals serve the function of allowing more timid participants to stay safely silent and rescuing the group leader from uncomfortable silences (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Some teachers may inadvertently reinforce a monopoliser's participation by praising their ideas, particularly in the beginning of the course when other students are reluctant to test the waters. It is important to intervene early so that this kind of pattern does not become ingrained.

8. Ask the class for help.

Sometimes faculty can become so absorbed in teaching that they don't even realize that disruptive behaviour is occurring in the classroom. For example, when students whisper during class, particularly when they are in the back of the room, they may be unaware of the distraction. Professors can ask the class for help in calling this and other disruptive behaviours to their attention, starting with the first day of class and continuing throughout the term. Even if they are reluctant to raise the issue publicly, students may report the problem privately to the instructor. Students welcome the opportunity to participate in setting class norms, and this empowers them to take control of their own learning environment (Di-Clementi & Handelsman, 2006).

Conclusion

In closing, before faculty attempt to intervene with students' disruptive behaviour, they should always examine their own. One study investigating faculty-student conflicts (Tantleff-Dunn, Dunn & Gokee, 2002), polled 122 undergraduate students and found that 11% of their complaints centered on faculty misbehaviours, such as being rude, insulting, unprepared, disorganized, ineffective, irresponsible, or biased against students in their classes. Although faculty may argue that some of these students misconstrued their behaviour, the students' perception of inappropriate behaviour by faculty is important in itself. It is the faculty's responsibility to model respectful behaviour if they want students to follow suit.

Disruptive behaviour by a few students can take up a disproportionate amount of a faculty member's time and energy. This points to the importance of faculty support for coping with disruptive behaviour, and the need to actively seek help and feedback for attempts at intervention. It also underscores the importance of intervening early, before patterns become entrenched. Finally, faculty should take care not to allow the behaviour of a few students to contaminate their feelings toward the other students and undermine the joy of teaching.

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