

Classroom Management: Exercises and Case Studies

EXERCISE #1: COMPUTERS IN THE CLASSROOM

You are teaching in a stadium-seating classroom, and a student sitting halfway back is using his laptop throughout the classroom time. Your syllabus states that it is OK for students to use their laptops in class, but they must be used to take notes—not to surf the Internet. After three classes, it is clear that the student is using his laptop for more than taking notes, because he often laughs, points, and whispers with the students around him.

What is your approach?

EXERCISE #2: TOO MUCH INFORMATION

You are teaching a discussion-based class in which one student monopolizes the discussions. While some points she makes are related to the topic at hand, her answers quickly veer off topic and occasionally involve sharing personal information that is surprising and upsetting to the rest of the class.

What are some ways to address this problem?

EXERCISE #3: HOW TO CLEAN A SNIPER RIFLE

You are teaching a small class of 15 students in a nursing program. One student talks at length about his collection of weapons and guns. He often talks to another male student in the class and recently purchased a new “high-powered rifle with particularly good optics.” The student often talks at breaks and before and after class about weapons, but generally avoids this talk during class time.

You are approached by several students after class who said that they were concerned about this student as a “Virginia Tech-like shooter.”

What do you do?

EXERCISE #4: WASTING AWAY AGAIN IN HISTORY 100

You have growing concerns over a student who has been showing up smelling of alcohol and either pot or clove cigarettes. The student’s work and participation have never been more than a B-/C level, but lately even that has dropped. You are certain there are days he is still intoxicated from the night before.

Other students avoid sitting near him—and while there hasn’t been any serious yelling or outrageous behavior in class, his behavior is disruptive and must be addressed.

What do you do?

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CASE STUDY: “BAD GRADE”

Jessica goes to Professor Wood after class, upset about a recent class grade. She wants extra-credit opportunities. She typically earns As and does well on the assignments, but didn’t do so well on the most recent test.

AN INEFFECTIVE WAY TO RESPOND

“I don’t feel I did my best on the last test. I’m used to doing so much better than the grade I got,” Jessica says. “I’m wondering if there are any extra-credit opportunities.”

Professor Wood says, “I’m sorry, I don’t give extra credit. I grade based only on what is stated in the syllabus: ‘Each test is worth 33% of the grade.’ So I apologize that you didn’t do well. Perhaps you should have studied harder or taken better notes.”

Your approach to classroom management depends on your assumptions and attitudes – which are sometimes called your “stance” – toward your students.

Jessica argues, “I took great notes. I knew the material. It was just the test. I seemed to freeze up on it. I don’t know why. Is there any way to change this? There are only three tests, and there is not a lot of time—”

Interrupting, Professor Wood says, “The rules were stated in advance. You knew what you were getting into with this test. You should’ve studied harder. The rest of the class seemed to do OK, so I don’t understand why you’re having a problem.”

When Jessica persists, the professor suggests that she stop by during office hours and, “If I’m not busy at that point, then I can find some time for you.”

ROGERS’ PERSON-CENTERED APPROACH

Your approach to classroom management depends on your assumptions and attitudes—which are sometimes called your “stance”—toward your students. Do you enter your classroom with the idea that you and the students are trying to reach a common goal? Or do you feel distracted and uninterested? You can tell that the faculty member in the example above came into the interaction with a preconceived notion about the student—not with a desire to connect or to achieve the goal of helping the student succeed.

The classroom management strategies that we will cover in this white paper assume that you are dedicated enough to want to shift and meet the challenge in front of you so that you can work with your students to create a common goal.

Carl Rogers, a famous humanistic counselor, brought us the person-centered approach to counseling. Rogers’ approach is made up of three central ideas:

1. **Genuineness and congruence.** You are who you are. You bring that self to the class, and you are congruent—you stay that way throughout the class. For example, if you have a laid-back teaching style, you may be engaging as you talk about your home life and events on campus. If you become very strict and very focused on the lecture one day—and are not engaging—students will see that behavior as incongruent.

- 2. Unconditional positive regard.** This doesn't mean you agree with everything your students do, because certainly they need correction and education. Instead, you approach students from a position of caring for them and wanting them to succeed. It is almost what a parent does for his or her child. Parents want to connect with their children. Similarly, your desire is to connect with students and help them reach their goals, knowing that sometimes students, because of the developmental process, get lost in these issues. They are in a different developmental stage, and you need to guide them through that.
- 3. Empathy and perceptions of empathy.** It is not enough to care for your students and be dedicated to the learning process. The students must feel that from you. You can communicate that right from the beginning, with the development of a quality syllabus and in discussions with your students during the first class to set classroom rules and expectations.

A story Rogers tells of his childhood seems appropriate here:

"I remember in my boyhood the bin in which we stored our winter's supply of potatoes was in the basement, several feet below a small window. The conditions were unfavorable, yet the potatoes would begin to sprout—pale white sprouts, so unlike the healthy green shoots they sent up when planted in the soil in the spring. But these sad, spindly sprouts would grow two or three feet in length as they would reach towards the distant light of the window. Under the most adverse circumstances, they were striving to become.

"Life would not give up, even if it could not flourish. The clue to understanding their behavior here is that they are striving, in the only ways that they perceive as available to them, to move towards growth, towards becoming. To healthy persons, the results may seem bizarre and futile, but they are life's desperate attempt to become itself. This potential constructive tendency is the underlying basis of the person-centered approach."

The phrase "striving to become" ties in directly with the suggestions presented here. If you believe in your students, if you are aware of their developmental stages and you encourage them as a gardener might encourage plant growth through creating a nurturing environment with soil, light, and water, your students will flourish.

Some of the most difficult students end up being the most rewarding. If you can ignite passion in a student, that makes the work you do more meaningful. Students don't want to be in conflict with you. They want to learn, to be happy, and to be connected.

Students become overwhelmed with stress. Other things get in the way of the student's natural growth pattern. Referring back to the story about the potato, it wasn't the potato's problem. It was where it was located—in the basement rather than in the sun.

Rogers suggests that if you employ empathetic listening, genuine caring, and positive support, you will help your students feel connected and explore new choices.

COVEY'S CONCEPTS AND APPLICATIONS

Stephen Covey, a motivational speaker and author, talks about the seven habits of highly effective people. Some of these issues apply to this case study:

- 1. Be proactive.** Being proactive means coming in with the right stance—the ability and desire to work with your students.

- 2. Begin with the end in mind.** This is essential for working with students who are at risk. If your goals are to have a successful interaction and to move in a positive direction, knowledge of that end is important all the way through the process.
- 3. Put first things first.** Pay attention to what you need to accomplish. In the previous case study, a student was upset about a grade and concerned about getting a good grade in the class. Start there and move forward.
- 4. Think win-win.** Develop strategies and goals that leave both people feeling successful.
- 5. Understand, then be understood.** Listen first and then express opinions. This is a clear, solid tenet of counseling.
- 6. Synergize.** Pull things together.
- 7. Sharpen the saw.** Maintain and renew.

Covey's seven habits apply here in several different ways, the first of which are seeking to understand the context of the student's behavior and finding a commonality. Put yourself in the student's shoes. Create a safe environment. Work together to create new opportunities for success and, as mentioned earlier, have a common goal: for your students to do well in the class and to learn from their experiences.

ADDRESSING THE PROBLEM

With the Rogers and Covey ideas at work, see how the outcome of the original scenario changes:

When Jessica approaches, the professor sits down on the edge of the table. His open body language puts him on the same level as Jessica literally and figuratively. He acknowledges her concern and asks for more information. Then he expresses an interest in Jessica's success and tells her how she can progress and improve in the class:

"I want you to succeed more than anything else. I pride myself on helping all my students succeed. I want you to know, first of all, that I do factor in improvement throughout the term. So if you do better on the next couple of exams, then certainly that will come into consideration."

Rogers suggests that if you employ empathetic listening, genuine caring, and positive support, you will help your students feel connected and explore new choices.

When Jessica asks about other opportunities to improve her grade—for example, through extra credit—the professor offers alternatives. These include meeting one-on-one during office hours or by appointment to review the material, or joining a study group. He ends the conversation by thanking Jessica for coming to him and restates his desire to help her succeed.

This more positive interaction occurred for several reasons. The professor showed genuine concern for Jessica and let her know they both cared about the same thing—her successful completion of the class. It helps if students are engaged and willing to do what it takes to succeed, which she definitely seemed to be.

In this case, the student left the conversation feeling she had an advocate instead of an adversary. She was on a path to addressing her problem.

CASE STUDY: “NOISY SLACKER”

Matthew, a first-year student, consistently shows up late to class and talks excessively during the class without being knowledgeable about the material. He’s fallen asleep several times, and other students have raised concerns. Professor Klein asks Matthew to stay after class.

AN INEFFECTIVE WAY TO RESPOND

“Matthew, I need to talk to you about what has been going on in class,” Professor Klein says. Another student approaches, and he tells that student he can wait—that the conversation with Matthew will be quick.

So in front of the other student, the professor starts in with Matthew: “You’re falling asleep in class, you’re not listening, and you’re late. When you’re here, you’re talking to others and you’re distracting to the class experience. I don’t know what you have to say about that. What is the deal?”

“It’s just college, man,” Matthew says. “I’m just trying to have fun here, and, you know, it’s cool. I just get distracted sometimes.”

“Calling me ‘man’ and telling me how it’s cool—it’s not cool, because I’m talking to you now about it,” says Professor Klein. “Listen to what I have to say. You’re not doing what I expect in class. I’ve set some clear expectations, but you’re not following those, so you’re going to fail.”

Next he speculates aloud to Matthew that he might have a substance abuse problem, because he comes to class smelling of alcohol and marijuana. “Maybe you need to go to AA and deal with that.”

Just at this point in the conversation, Matthew’s cell phone rings and he answers it. This interruption escalates the professor’s annoyance, and he moves toward terminating the conversation. “It feels like you’re wasting my time, and I’m wasting your time, so why bother, OK? You’re not doing well in my class. You’re going to fail, and until you decide to work on your problems, I don’t know what else to tell you.”

What is left for the student to say? “You’re right. That’s what’s going to happen.”

Clearly, there was no resolution in this scenario. The professor and the student didn’t connect, nor did the professor get the student to acknowledge accountability for his actions.

MOTIVATIONAL INTERVIEWING THEORY AND APPLICATION

Motivational interviewing (also known as motivational enhancement therapy) is a technique you may find helpful in such a situation in your classroom.

It is important to avoid communications that create a superior/inferior relationship between you and the student.

Psychologist William R. Miller, Ph D, an expert on change psychology, wrote, “Motivation can be understood not as something that one has but rather as something one does. It involves recognizing a problem, searching for a way to change, and then beginning and sticking with that change strategy.”

Motivational interviewing has five key elements: expressing empathy, developing discrepancy, avoiding argumentation, rolling with resistance, and supporting self-efficacy. You may

know of this technique from its use in student affairs and in student development as a way of having students talk about alcohol. It is part of the Brief Alcohol Screening and Intervention of College Students (BASICS) program, a preventive intervention program to reduce drinking and enhance awareness about alcohol-related issues.

- 1. Express empathy.** It is important to avoid communications that create a superior/inferior relationship between you and the student. You and the student must be on the same page, with you respecting the student's choice and self-direction. The idea of motivational interviewing is to have the student think about their choices as opposed to you labeling the choices you assume they have made.
- 2. Develop discrepancy.** Change occurs when students perceive a discrepancy between where they are currently and where they want to go. Your goal is to help them understand that they are not yet on the path to that goal. This helps them become aware of the consequences of their negative behavior.
- 3. Avoid argumentation.** If a direct argument ensues, it tends to evoke resistance, and that is counterproductive. You want to use strategies that get students to see their own negative behaviors and how they can go about moving forward in a more positive manner.
- 4. Roll with resistance.** You don't want to meet resistance head on. The goal is to roll with the momentum the students put out there, so that as they are thinking about their choices you are shifting their perceptions. It is a student-centered approach, as opposed to solutions you dictate.
- 5. Support self-efficacy.** Self-efficacy is the belief that one can perform a particular behavior or accomplish a particular task, according to psychologist Albert Bandura. The student needs to be persuaded that it is possible to change problematic behavior. If students believe they can change their behavior, they are more likely to move forward through the change process.

Try to see the situation from the student's perspective in order to understand why the student lacks motivation to change. With that insight, you'll be able to guide the student to an understanding about the mismatch between the current circumstances and the desired outcome.

PROCHASKA AND DICLEMENTE'S CHANGE MODEL

Successful behavior change follows a predictable pattern, according to the James Prochaska and Carlo DiClemente "stages of change" model. They maintain that people go through a precontemplation stage, where they think about a change they want to make but aren't sure whether they actually will make. Contemplation is actually considering how they will proceed

PRECONTEMPLATION



CONTEMPLATION



PREPARATION



ACTION



MAINTENANCE/RELAPSE

in making this change. Preparation and action are the stages during which they are actively working on the change, and then maintenance (and/or relapse) is the natural course after making the change. For change to happen, students must be helped further along on this continuum. They need to go through the precontemplation and contemplation stages and then prepare and act before change actually happens.

Your students may fail to change if you don't lead them through these stages. Changing a student's behavior requires that they have some understanding of their position on this continuum. Cutting short

this process explains many of the frustrations you may face with hostile or unmotivated students. Students need to desire change in order to take active steps to achieve it.

Returning to the situation with Professor Klein and Matthew, the professor focuses on motivational interviewing to change the student's behavior.

ADDRESSING THE PROBLEM

This time Professor Klein, meeting with Matthew after class, dismisses the other student who approaches so that he and Matthew can talk privately. He starts with expressing concern about how Matthew is doing in the classroom. When Matthew counters with a curt "I'm doing fine," the professor asks him to define that. Matthew is defensive. "I'm here, aren't I? I'm showing up, coming to class."

The professor acknowledges the student's effort. "So you're making the effort to be here, which is not easy, because you're at college. This is your first semester?" Then he gets to the behavioral concerns. "I'm guessing this will make you a little angry, but I need to let you know what's going on. I don't want you to be surprised if you don't get a good grade in the class, because I think that's where you're headed."

"You're saying you're going to fail me, or what?"

"Well, I think that's up to you, but that's where you're headed right now."

He keeps the focus on Matthew's success while maintaining a respectful tone, even as the student's tone and behavior are blatantly rude.

Professor Klein counters Matthew's resistance with neutral questions that draw him into a two-way conversation. He keeps the focus on Matthew's success while maintaining a respectful tone, even as the student's tone and behavior are blatantly rude.

"I want you to be successful, and I want to figure out how we can do that together. So you're making it to class. That's something, right? That's a starting point," the professor says. Then he advances another concern—Matthew's lateness.

Matthew says, "It's college, man. You know, you're out last night, partying and stuff like that. I overslept a couple of times. It doesn't happen a lot. Do you hold everybody after class when they show up late like this, or what?"

Professor Klein counters, "I want us to be working together toward getting you in a better spot. This might be different than high school. When a professor or a teacher held you after class, it was because you were in trouble. I'm taking extra time because I want to see you be successful, OK?"

This time when Matthew's cell phone rings, the professor remains calm. "Thanks for getting off so quickly," he says. "How do we move forward with this? I see one or two problems. One's coming in late. Sometimes when you're here you get to talking socially to some other folks in class. That can be a problem, too."

But the professor doesn't utterly ignore the cell phone issue. When Matthew dismisses the professor's point about conversations during class, Professor Klein says, "It comes off—and I don't know if you're intending it to come off this way, but sometimes it's a little rude if I'm talking. Almost like the phone call thing. It wasn't your intention, but it was kind of rude because we were talking."

He is helping the student see the gap between his actions versus his intention and desired outcome.

“What I’m hearing you saying is, ‘I’m trying. I’m coming to class. I put my phone on vibrate. I care about being seen as a good student.’ What I’m saying is that you need to try a little bit harder if your goal is to do OK in the class,” the professor says.

Instead of the speculation about substance abuse in the original example, with this approach the professor mentions that other students—and he himself as a former student—have had difficulty and have found it helpful to talk with an advisor and friends who provided tips on how to study.

It can be difficult to get somewhere with this sort of unmotivated student. You may not get to the exact place you want to be. But you can get that student to take some steps. This revised scenario uses a harm-reduction strategy from motivational interviewing. You get the student to make incremental changes after identifying the problems and steps that can be taken to solve them. Realistically, the goal can’t be to “solve the problem.” Rather, it’s to help the student understand what the first steps are on the path that is going in the right direction.

CASE STUDY: “LEARNING DISABILITY”

Midway through the semester, Emily, concerned about her progress in her biology class, complains to Professor Abbott that he talks too fast during lectures. She is worried about failing the course and also that she has chosen the wrong major. Emily claims to have a learning disability and wants accommodations.

AN INEFFECTIVE WAY TO RESPOND

“I wanted to talk to you about the test and how I haven’t been doing too well. I just want to say that you’ve been talking a little fast. I’m trying to take notes and keep up, but it’s going a little fast for me. I wanted to figure out if there’s a way to work with this,” Emily says.

The professor mentions that he has taught the same way for 15 years and that other students are handling the class. “Perhaps you’re not up to the challenge of my course. This is an advanced biology course, you know,” he says.

Emily explains that when she reads the material slowly, she does retain it. She adds, “I’ve always wanted to be a doctor, but I’m falling behind in this and it’s making me rethink some things. But I also have a learning disability. I worked with it in high school. But I wanted to come in here with a blank slate.”

Professor Abbott says he didn’t receive any paperwork about Emily’s learning disability and that it is too late to be making an accommodation request. He suggests that she drop the course and consider a different major. When Emily asks again, Professor Abbott suggests that she work harder and become a “better student,” adding that she doesn’t seem to be capable of that.

SIMON BAILEY’S THEORY AND APPLICATION

Motivational speaker Simon Bailey sees people as diamonds in the rough. For your students, there is a shaping and clarifying process and then a cutting process. Time, temperature, pressure, and experiences all shape a diamond. This isn’t anything new. This aligns with Rogers’ work and a core idea here: seeing students’ potential and understanding them in that light.

Bailey suggests that internal thoughts and beliefs about the world impact our ability to take action. This is evident in this scenario. Emily had preconceived notions about what she could and couldn’t do, and the professor just confirmed them and didn’t offer solutions.

Instead, see your underperforming student as someone you can guide through a process similar to what a diamond undergoes—being pressured, shaped, cut, and clarified to become that wonderful student who ultimately walks across the stage at graduation. This is a difficult task. You are working with students to help them shape who they can become. As with the situation where the student’s cell phone rings in the professor’s face, sometimes that means pausing, holding onto that the goal—to return to it again in the future—and not having an immediate reaction.

Bailey talks about altering your beliefs about a student. In this case, the professor sees the student as not putting in the effort, not being capable of achieving her goals, and not being successful. But when you alter such beliefs, you create chances for students to perform in different and unique ways. When that happens with one student, Bailey says, that can happen with all of your students. In fact, when that happens with all of your classes, that can change a department, he says.

So when you believe in your students and when you alter your beliefs about them as unmotivated slackers, that is when you can create unique opportunities for them to be successful.

So when you believe in your students and when you alter your beliefs about them as slackers, as unmotivated—when you see yourself in those students—that is when you can create unique opportunities for students to be successful. Everyone can be successful under the right circumstances, and part of teaching is connecting to the student and uncovering those right circumstances.

Next, see this internal shift to empathy and understanding in practice in the classroom.

ADDRESSING THE PROBLEM

When the Emily goes to Professor Abbott with this concern, he leads with empathy and concern. “I understand this is a difficult course, and there’s a lot of material we need to cover, but I’m committed to helping you succeed. What kinds of things can I do to help you?”

The student reveals her learning disability and plans for the future. “I have a learning disability, and they made accommodations for me when I was in high school. They used to help me out. I really like biology. I want to be a doctor, but this is going too fast. I want to slow it down a bit so I can catch up.”

Next, the professor suggests a specific resource—the learning support services department. It turns out the student is unaware the department exists.

Professor Abbott elaborates, “You should go over to that department. I would recommend you have a conversation with them, because they give us information that we can use to help you.”

Then the professor makes two other suggestions—using a tape recorder and enlisting the help of note-takers through learning support services.

“I want to see you succeed. I’m more than willing to spend the time it takes with you to help you understand the material a little bit more. I appreciate the feedback about me going quickly, so maybe I need to do a little bit more in terms of reiterating some of the major points I’m making,” Professor Abbott says.

Emily says, “Just saying the main points again at the end of the seminar would probably help a lot in terms of taking notes. I didn’t know about the other services. As I said, I just want to succeed in this class. It’s something I’ve always wanted.”

The professor concludes, “Well, I want to help you reach that goal. It’s going to take some work on your part, but I’m more than willing to do some things to see you succeed.”

The revised scenario shows a difference in stance and a belief that the student can be successful.

You may feel—as many faculty members do—that students are not as prepared as they used to be and that you have to adapt your style. It is true that there are different ways to help a student succeed and different ways to present material for students who have different ways of learning. Try to see it as a challenge to reach as many students as possible.

CASE STUDY: “FREAKING OUT”

Chris feels overwhelmed about an upcoming presentation on the Vietnam War that he must make in class. He tells Professor Allen he is “freaking out” several times a week, hyperventilating, feeling like he is going to pass out, and crying uncontrollably.

AN INEFFECTIVE WAY TO RESPOND

“Hey, Chris. What’s up?” Professor Allen asks a student who comes up to the front of the room after class

“Yeah, well...” Chris starts and then stops. After a moment, he says, “I’m having some problems with the speech that I’m supposed to give in this class next week. It’s hitting home in a couple of ways, and I was wondering if there’s something I could do about it. I’m having a lot of issues—trouble catching my breath, crying after trying to practice—stuff like that,” Chris says.

“It sounds like you’re just anxious about it,” the professor says. “I’ve been teaching a long time, and students always have trouble with these kinds of presentations. They get anxious—kind of like stage fright. I would say just practice it more often. Try not to worry about it so much and you’ll be fine.”

Chris isn’t easily convinced. “I’m not practicing in front of anybody. I’m not about to have this happen in front of anybody else. I mean, it’s on Vietnam. I’m just going over the material and I’m starting to talk about it, and I just kind of snap.”

Professor Allen counters, “I’m not sure what to tell you. If I were teaching a math class, people can’t say, ‘The quadratic formula is just not clicking for me.’ Vietnam is a huge section of our course. You need to master the material. You have four other students doing a counterpoint argument with you who are depending on you to present your point well. So it’s not only you who’s going to get in trouble with this if you don’t do it well.”

Chris attempts to explain further. “I don’t agree with what I’m arguing in terms of what’s been assigned to me, and I don’t like the position I’m supposed to take,” he says.

“Well, Chris, who agrees with everything they have to argue? That’s the point of the course. You’re learning something new,” the professor says. “It is your job to present this side of the war. I’m teaching you to work a little harder and not let all of your friends down. You’re having stage fright—nothing more than that.”

ALBERT ELLIS AND RATIONAL EMOTIVE BEHAVIORAL THERAPY

In this scenario, the professor didn’t seem empathetic toward the student’s issues. Students are coming to college with more anxiety issues and other types of clinical problems. When it comes to class presentations, anxiety runs especially high for many students.

Albert Ellis’s rational emotive behavioral therapy is a slightly different approach in this final scenario. With the other scenarios, you’ve seen how you can shift goals and ways of working with the students. Ellis’s approach is not used as often, but it is good to have in your tool kit. This approach looks at situations in terms of A, B, and C:

- A—Activating events: the things causing upset and worry
- B—Beliefs about these things
- C—Consequences: what happens as a result

For example, a student is consistently late with assignments. That is the activating event. It is something that happens. You don't have any control over it.

You've already talked to the student about coming to class unprepared. Your belief is that he does not care and he is challenging your authority. You are upset with him. You feel he is not doing the work. The consequence of your belief, based on this activating event, is that you embarrass the student in front of the class by saying something like, "Where's your assignment? This is the third time that you haven't done this. How come everyone else can do the work?"

Your reactions in these types of situations typically become so familiar that you may not think about them. You feel there is no other choice. They have become automatic. But that is not what they are at all; they are just bad habits.

So how can you change these bad habits? If you are dealing with a student, say, who is missing class—a common problem—that is an activating event. Now imagine that the student gets a bad grade on a test. That is an activating event.

Have you ever gotten your evaluations back and had one or two poor evaluations out of 30? What do you do? Maybe you ask, "Why did that one person say that bad thing about how I talk?" Many of us magnify the few bad things and thus magnify our stress. What happens? You become upset, uncomfortable, and frustrated. Thinking becomes muddled. It becomes bigger than it is. That one poor evaluation becomes a memory that you keep with you for years.

If you can take just one point from this white paper, make it the idea of forward focus. Instead of focusing on what was and what cannot be changed, focus on what is and what can be done. Let things go, and move forward.

Instead of maximizing or magnifying an activating event, try minimizing it. This leads to some calmness. You feel more at ease. You think more clearly and you can solve the problem. You eliminate the source of stress.

In the case study with the anxious student, the activating event for the student might appear to be the fact that he has stage fright, but it might really be that his father is in Iraq, and presenting a talk on the Vietnam War hits very close to home.

A professor could use this ABC approach to calm the student.

Help the student remain calm with what is happening. In this case, the student might be becoming upset. Ask him to stop and take a deep breath. Encourage him to consider alternative interpretations of the situation.

This approach involves a five-step process:

1. **Find the good in the situation.** Start a conversation with him about the fact that he is at class and you are happy to see him at class. Start from his strengths. If he talks during class, start

by saying it is good that he is engaged enough to have something he wants to talk about, but you want to help focus him on the materials.

- 2. Control your inner dialogue.** If you see a student who seems unmotivated and not focused on what he should be learning, you may think: “These students aren’t like the ones I’ve taught. They can’t learn anything.”

An alternative view might be that each class is different and that maybe there is another way to present the content. That is a shift in how you are viewing your own activating event. Oftentimes, if you teach two sections of the same course using exactly the same approach, one class goes a certain way and the other class has completely opposite results. It’s because there are different people in the class, different connections, and different ways of engaging students.

- 3. Avoid the blame game.** It is natural to want to blame other people for the bad things that happen. There are plenty of excuses. But be careful about which messages you encourage in yourself. Accept responsibility for the things on your plate and within your control.
- 4. Shift your focus forward.** If you can take just one point from this white paper, make it the idea of forward focus. Instead of focusing on what was and what cannot be changed, focus on what is and what can be done. Let things go, and move forward. Rather than wallowing in something bad that has occurred, think about solutions.
- 5. Keep problems in perspective.** The student in this last case study had panic attack symptoms. He was allowing the prospect of this one class presentation to get out of perspective and overwhelm him. You can help keep problems in perspective and maximize the strengths of the student. You can encourage a student to take control and responsibility for his behavior and not see it as automatic. There’s always a choice.

See how the outcome changes when Professor Allen helps Chris address how he reacts to stress. Consider his approach to referring the student to counseling and how you might adapt it to your own style.

ADDRESSING THE PROBLEM

“So you are worried about the presentation coming up,” Professor Allen says. This open-ended observation invites the student to talk about what is troubling him.

“Yeah, I’m having problems with my preparation for it. I start to breathe heavily, and the stress is getting to me a bit,” Chris says.

“All right. Has this ever happened before when you presented in other classes, or is this something new for you?”

Chris responds that while he has been nervous about speaking before, this is the worst and he believes it has to do with the topic—because his father has been in Iraq for more than a year, and Chris is worried his father won’t return.

“Let’s see how we can get through it together,” the professor says. “This sounds like it’s a larger issue—that this one kind of topic or speech is really getting things ramped up for you, maybe thinking about your dad?”

Chris agrees, and Professor Allen makes a couple of suggestions. “There are a couple of options for you. There’s one I tell all my students, as I did in the beginning of this class: Going to counseling, or even talking to your RA or your RD or an advisor, sometimes can help with the stresses that come along with college. The things you are describing—I know a little bit about psychology—sound almost like panic attacks. Have you thought about talking to a counselor about some of this?”

“I don’t know if anybody would understand what’s going on. It’s the first time this has ever happened, but I’ll give it a shot.”

“OK, I could even walk you over after class, maybe one day next week. We could set up an appointment and make you feel a little more comfortable getting over there.”

To address the problem of the classmates depending on Chris to do well on the presentation, Professor Allen suggests meeting with the students to discuss a solution.

Sometimes it is enough to let students know there are resources for them. They relax and allow you to get closer to a solution.

“You’re not going to fail my class because of this one assignment, and we’ll work it out together,” the professor says. “I’ve had these kinds of things happen to me, too—not necessarily panic attacks. But sometimes I definitely see that one thing in front of me, and I don’t see anything else. So I can relate to that experience. When I’m feeling like that, it’s helpful to have friends who tell me, ‘You’re worrying too much about this one thing. We’ll figure it out.’ Does that give you a little more relief?”

“That sounds good. Thank you. I appreciate it.”

You may worry that if you don’t get someone directly over to counseling that maybe you are not being effective. But it can be as simple as just bringing up the idea of counseling—planting the seed. Sometimes it is enough to let students know there are resources for them. They relax and allow you to get closer to a solution. Understanding and connecting to them is important. Showing that you understand things from their point of view can be calming.

CONCLUSION

THINGS TO REMEMBER WHEN WORKING WITH DISRUPTIVE STUDENTS

Here are some final thoughts on working with difficult and disruptive students:

- 1. Work as a team.** You are not alone when you are working with students in the classroom. You can refer at-risk students to counseling services, or you can seek guidance from counseling on how to approach a situation. You can consult a department head, a dean, or a student's advisor. While these interventions may take some extra time, they often are well worth the effort to assist students in their long-term development.
- 2. The professor always wins.** In the end, you retain the ultimate ability to grade your students and control your classroom. Most schools respect a professor's right to ask students to leave the classroom if they are disruptive. Likewise, the professor retains the ability to set a student's grade, based on the requirements stated in the syllabus. It is useful to include point and percentage values for participation as part of your students' overall grades.
- 3. You don't have to address violent threats in the moment.** If a student is threatening or disruptive in the classroom, consider adjusting your goal to just making it through to the end of class, or end the class early. Then you can address the behavior with the department head, student affairs dean, or counseling staff.
- 4. Set rules and expectations for classroom behavior early during the semester and in your syllabus.** This provides a base point for future confrontations with students. Allow students to help develop classroom standards and manners. Often, students are stricter than you could ever be.
- 5. Don't give disruptive student behavior energy to increase.** Many times, behavior can be disrupted by "taking the wind out of their sails." Consider rolling with odd questions or accusations, avoiding argumentation, and staying focused on the topic at hand.

RESOURCES

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