

Chapter 5 - Managing Students & the Classroom Climate

How you manage your students – and at times, yourself – can determine your success or failure in the classroom. This chapter helps you survive in the classroom – through behavioral suggestions, preparation guidelines, and common problems most instructors have encountered.

- **Typical Problems**
- **Some Survival Tips for the First Class Meeting**
- **Guidelines for Building Positive Classroom Climates**

Typical Problems

Here, we list a few typical problems that most instructors have experienced at some point in their teaching.

Class Attendance

What do you do if students do not attend class?

Contrary to any rumors you may hear, official University policy is:

Students are expected to attend all of their scheduled University classes, and other University activities such as examinations, study halls, and tutorials, as determined by their departments and University faculty and staff. The University reserves the right to deal at any time with individual cases of nonattendance. The effect of absences upon grades is determined by the instructor. Arranging to make up work missed because of legitimate class absence is the responsibility of the student.

General Bulletin

Depending upon the type of section, many instructors leave the question of attendance up to individual students. At the beginning of the semester, it is a good idea to inform students, in writing, of your attendance policy.



Related Chapter

Chapter 3

Creating a Syllabus, which gives examples for writing policy and rule statements.

If you require attendance, be certain to have a system for recording it and a policy to follow for those who are absent.

If you do not require attendance, it is still important to keep good attendance records. If a student comes to you because they are not passing your class, it is helpful to know the student's attendance record. Any guilty feelings you may have when a student fails can be relieved if you have recorded that they never came to class. Also, you should not feel that you must spend extra time with a student who wants to make up the work they missed due to unexcused, long absences.

Answering Questions

What if you do not know the answer to a student's question?

Check with the student to be sure you understand the question. Repeat the question and ask, "Is this what you are asking?" It is not unusual to misunderstand what a student is saying. In addition, students often have a hard time formulating a clear question, so it is entirely possible that what you heard was not easy to understand.

If an attempt at question clarification fails, ask, "Can someone else explain the question to me?" Or, ask the student to talk to you after class when you have more time.

Finally, give positive feedback – "That's a good question! Let me see what I can find and I'll get back to you," and then be sure to find an answer for the next class meeting or, if your course has a website, post the question and answer to the website.

What if a student asks for advice about problems beyond your responsibilities?

Students may ask you for advice about their social and personal as well as their academic problems. Many times, just being a sympathetic listener can help the student. You may have had several years of successfully juggling the academic and social aspects of life and genuinely can be of assistance.

Sometimes students come to you with academic or social problems that go beyond the scope of your professional or personal capabilities. When confronted with a student who seeks your help, be aware of your limitations. Occasionally, you and your colleagues will not know how to deal with a problem student. For these situations, the Student Counseling Center is an excellent resource. Referring students to the Center is often the biggest favor you can do for them. Remind them that information resulting from consultations with counselors is kept strictly confidential.

Instructor-Student Interactions

How friendly should you be with students?

Lack of friendliness or interest in students' performance is often cited as a major weakness of poor instructors. Some individuals, consciously or unconsciously, adopt a condescending or stay away attitude toward students. But the instructor plays an important role between the subject matter and the students. Learning is more than making information available. Interacting with the material and with an expert in the discipline is more likely to encourage student learning.

There are instances when instructors may be perceived as too friendly with students. To win students' admiration and friendship, instructors try to become "one of the guys or gals." If there is little social distance between you and your students, you may create uncomfortable situations. Trying to be a "buddy" is typically an inaccurate reflection of reality.

First, you are not one of the students; you are their instructor who has legitimate authority over them. Second, it may not be easy for you to impartially evaluate a student who has become a friend. Finally, some students will never accept you as a friend; they see you only in your role as instructor and an evaluator.

While there is no stated University policy against dating a student, it is considered unprofessional to do so especially when the instructor has influence over a student's grades and academic performance. It is best to avoid potential dating situations by maintaining a strictly professional relationship with your students.

How can you manage the well-meaning but disruptive student?

Not all classroom disruptions are intentional. Providing an atmosphere conducive to learning for all students in the class is the responsibility of the instructor. Late arrivals, text messaging during lectures, inappropriate questions, and other distractions are all issues that can be addressed through policies set up at the beginning of the semester. When an issue arises, deal with it immediately and politely. If this does not work, ask the student to stay after class and bring up the topic then. Well-meaning students typically are unaware of the problems they have created and are happy to respond to your plea for assistance. The rest of the class also appreciates your recognizing and dealing with the problem judiciously and immediately. Often, such inappropriate behavior results from cultural differences.

How can you manage the student who is disruptive and not well meaning?

While such students are in the minority, they can cause a great deal of concern among new instructors and other students in the class. Such problem students are aware of their behavior and deliberately choose it. These students try to stretch the boundaries of what is appropriate by laughing with their friends when you or other students are talking, by reading newspapers or magazines in class, by taking every opportunity to publicly challenge or discredit you, or by acting rudely toward classmates. If you have not faced similar situations before, you may not be able to react appropriately at first. Usually, discussion with the student should be moved to your office. You do want to deal with the situation as soon as possible, but after you have thought about it. Avoid sarcasm or arguments in class, as these are also disruptive to the learning atmosphere that you want to foster.

No matter what, the responsibility for establishing and maintaining a good teaching/learning atmosphere rests with you. Do not tolerate disruptive behavior that interferes with either your instruction or the rights of other students. Do not hope the problem will go away by itself; it rarely does. Discuss such problems with your colleagues and deal with them as soon as possible.

Additional Support

If you experience any problems we have not addressed, feel free to avail yourself of other resources on campus – your own department or other campus organizations.

One of the greatest skills we learn in higher education is how to solve problems. If you would like to find out more about a particular instructional strategy or issue, contact the Office of Distance Learning.



Related Chapter

Chapter 15

For listings of academic and administrative support services, see **Support and Resources**.

Some Survival Tips for the First Class Meeting

The first few class meetings often set the tone for the remainder of the semester. With this in mind, have an organized plan. Know what you intend to say and do before you get in front of the class. Students appreciate sessions that are organized and have a sense of purpose. Remember, first impressions are being formed and sometimes those impressions color the class climate for the remainder of the semester.

Prior to Your First Meeting

- Locate and visit the classroom. This will eliminate the possibility of becoming lost and arriving late the first day. This inspection may influence future planning considerations, i.e., arrangement of furniture, whether groups can be formed easily, the possibility of using media, location of chalkboard or screens, need for requests for equipment.

On the First Day of Class

- Display to your students:
 - ◊ The course and section
 - ◊ Your name
- Introduce yourself and share something about yourself. You may wish to tell the students something about your academic background or professional interests, why you are teaching the course, some personal information that might help students become more relaxed. Approach this with creativity.
- You may find it easier to manage the classroom climate if you conduct a brief survey to collect background information on students, their prior knowledge/skills related to the course, and their expected learning outcomes from the course. Such information is useful in understanding students' interests, strengths/weaknesses, and level of knowledge. Some instructors have information sheets for students to fill out or ask students to use 3 x 5 cards to supply information. Some faculty members use the on-

line photo rosters of students and put these on the class website. For instructions on obtaining a photo roster of your class and how to fit all photos on one page, go to <http://ctl.fsu.edu/explore/bestpractices/docs/pictureroster.pdf>

- An activity for “breaking the ice” can be used to help students become more willing to participate and will allow students to learn more about each other. This can be very beneficial if groups will be formed in class.
- Sometimes this first day gets to be simply a list of do’s and don’ts. You could use the time to sell the course, the discipline, and your interest in it. This might help the students get more interested in the content. The Teaching Professor (1989) suggests that you let students know why this course is interesting, why you like teaching it.

Discuss Your Syllabus

Much, if not all, of the information on your syllabus should be discussed.

- An important function of the first day is to indicate the structure of the course – content to be covered, justification for your choice of content, how the content fits into the curriculum, a schedule of that coverage, etc.
- Students generally want to know more about things that affect their grades: attendance, test and quiz policies, homework, how much work the course requires, your expectations, and your grading policy. The students should know what is expected of them for your course.

- One way to approach learning objectives is to ask students what they intend to get out of the course. Some of these ideas can be incorporated into or may be the same as the objectives you stated on the syllabus. This gives students a feeling of being part of the planning of the course.
- Discuss the texts, required readings, or reserved readings in the library.

Guidelines for Building Positive Classroom Climates

No matter what degree of friendliness you maintain, there are some things that you can do to build an effective learning atmosphere and indicate your interest in your students.

- Arrive a few minutes early to chat with students about the course assignments or campus events. Because it is common for many of us to be tongue-tied when we are trying to start a conversation, it is helpful if you have two or three questions thought out ahead of time.

Examples

- Did you find the assignment difficult?
 - What was the hardest part of it?
 - Did you see the women's volleyball game Friday night?
 - I'm up to my neck in work. How are you surviving?
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- Attempt to learn students' names. You could use a class roster or a seating chart. If you prefer not to take the time to call roll, then find some way to recognize students by name (returning assignments, calling on them in class, forming groups).
 - Acknowledge and praise students' good contributions in class. It is helpful to notice how praise occurs in everyday conversation, so that you can transfer the same natural praises to the classroom. Certainly correct students' mistakes but never put a student down for trying. One professor's theory is to never say NO to a student. Find other ways to make sure the correct information is received by all students.

- Be tolerant of students' viewpoints. Rather than thinking of differing viewpoints as contradictory to your own, attempt to compare and contrast them as one means of getting your original lesson across to the students. Your tolerance models appropriate classroom behavior for students – and you can extend that modeling through judicious selection of activities such as role-playing, staged debates, and case studies that focus on the process of interaction and not just on its subject.
- Step away from the lectern. Standing behind something implies a physical barrier between “us” and “them” and detracts from a sense of “immediacy” or connection that research has shown to be a primary factor in reducing classroom incivility. Being connected also helps model appropriate collegial behavior. You also can emphasize this by not being territorial: just as body language can be perceived as closed or defensive, so can your movement (or lack of it) in class. Step off the stage and move around the room. Sit down from time to time. Get on the students' level and become their colleague, not their superior (nor their buddy, as mentioned earlier). Share learning.
- Stay after class to answer questions.
- Select varied office hours and keep them. Invite students to stop by to discuss their performance on tests, quizzes, and assignments. You may actually have to require students to come to your office. Students usually do not come of their own initiative even if they know they should. Do not simply ask those few students who need your assistance to come to your office; encourage all students to come talk to you.
- Consider holding extra help or review sessions outside of regularly scheduled classes, especially to prepare for exams.
- Obtain early feedback from your students about your teaching. This will give you time to make changes in your class that will make a difference before the semester is over. You may request that the Teaching Assessment by Students (TABS) rating system be administered to your class anytime during the semester. (For more information, call the Office of Distance Learning at 644-4535.) Or you could use other means to gather information from your students - using informal questionnaires, meeting with small groups of students to discuss how the course is progressing, or asking students from class to interview their fellow classmates about their perspective on the success of the class.

The Teaching Professor (1989)