

# Classroom Management Strategies: Topics and Tips

January 27, 2011

## Defining disruptive behavior

Penn State's definition:

"...an action or combination of actions by one or more individuals that unreasonably interferes with, hinders, obstructs, or prevents the operation of the University or infringes on the rights of others to freely participate in its programs and services."<sup>1</sup>

According to students and faculty, top disruptive actions include<sup>2</sup>:

- Students talking loudly<sup>3</sup>
- Sarcastic comments and nonverbal signs of disrespect from students<sup>4</sup>
- Unpredictable/highly emotional outbursts from one or two students

## Classroom incivility: planning and prevention

- Practice immediacy:
  - Arrive to class early and chat informally with students
  - Present at a moderate pace; take time to pause, slow down
  - Listen to students carefully without signs of impatience
  - Learn students' names
- Be clear on expectations, due dates for tests and assignments
- Be clear on the kind of behavior you expect in class, and model that behavior<sup>5</sup>
  - Examples: starting class on time; returning papers/tests on time
- Plan to actively engage students in appropriate learning activities: e.g., discussion, group work, cases, video

## Identifying disturbing or worrisome behaviors

- Questionable behavior (examples):
  - Unsolicited attempts to talk about unusual or controversial topics
  - "Inappropriate affect" e.g., talking louder than necessary to communicate
- Assessing whether these behaviors are risky or simply odd can be difficult:<sup>6</sup>
  - Talk to student one on one
  - Show concern; ask questions
  - Observe boundaries
  - You can get others involved to get more information
  - Time/energy spent now saves it later

---

<sup>1</sup> The Pennsylvania State University Code of Conduct, 2007. <http://studentaffairs.psu.edu/judicial/codeofconduct/>

<sup>2</sup> Boice, Bob; 1996. Classroom Incivilities. *Research in Higher Education* 37(4): 453-486.

<sup>3</sup> Arizona Idol; Dean of Students Office, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ.

<sup>4</sup> Students on Incivility in the Classroom. *The Teaching Professor* 25(1): 4

<sup>5</sup> Price, Christy; 2010. Solutions for Student Incivility. *The Teaching Professor* 24(7): 6-7.

<sup>6</sup> Penn State Counseling and Psychological Services. *Worrisome student behaviors.*

[http://www.sa.psu.edu/caps/assisting\\_students.shtml](http://www.sa.psu.edu/caps/assisting_students.shtml)

## Managing sensitive classroom discussions<sup>7</sup>

- Set ground rules on the first day of class:
  - Give students an idea of the range and types of topics
  - Syllabus is a great place for guidelines on classroom etiquette
  - Create a respectful classroom environment
    - Icebreakers; group work
    - Can work as a group to set expectations
  
- Depersonalize discussions on sensitive topics:
  - Focus on the topic, not the person
  - Bring the discussion back to the reading. Ask students:
    - How does what we've read relate to this issue?
    - Which part of the author's argument is most (un)convincing? Why?
  - Avoid becoming emotionally involved in class discussions
  
- Take on the role of facilitator:
  - If a comment is unacceptable, intervene immediately
  - If the discussion is getting off topic, summarize the debate (or ask students to do so)
  - If discussion becomes uncivil, ask students to pause and write down their reflections on the topic
    - You can use these responses to reopen the discussion at another class meeting
  
  - When students disagree—with each other or with you<sup>8</sup>:
    - Refer to a text or other authority
    - Use the disagreement as the basis for an assignment or group “fact-finding mission”
    - If there is an answer that can be verified experimentally, ask the class to review the method involved
    - List objections on board

## Resources

Example of clear instructor expectations for student behavior:

[http://certi.mst.edu/documents/Contract\\_on\\_classroom\\_behavior1.pdf](http://certi.mst.edu/documents/Contract_on_classroom_behavior1.pdf)

PSU guidelines and procedures on disruptive behavior:

<http://studentaffairs.psu.edu/judicial/classdisrupt.shtml>

Recognizing and addressing worrisome student behaviors:

[http://www.sa.psu.edu/caps/assisting\\_students.shtml](http://www.sa.psu.edu/caps/assisting_students.shtml)

<http://www.psu.edu/oue/disruptions.pdf>

More tips on managing hot moments in the classroom:

<http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/html/icb.topic58474/hotmoments.html>

---

<sup>7</sup> Brunow, Beate. *Teaching Sensitive Topics*. Handout. Schreyer Institute for Teaching Excellence.

<sup>8</sup> McKeachie, Wilbert and Marilla Svinicki, 2010. Facilitating discussion. In McKeachie's *Teaching Tips*. Houghton Mifflin, New York.