

## Classroom Challenges: Tips for Instructors

Sometimes, particular students may cause challenges in class, without warranting major negotiation or intervention. A few common situations, and ways to work them out, are discussed below.

### Arguments in Class

When arguments erupt in class, or when a student makes an inflammatory comment, your role as the instructor is to preserve the learning environment. This task is two-fold:

1. First, maintain a safe environment for your students, which means **preventing the debate from turning into a prolonged attack** on either individual students or groups with whom students may identify. It also means **keeping your cool and staying respectful** if a student challenges you; this preserves students' trust in you.
2. Second, **look for the learning opportunity** in the experience. What is the value for students in hearing opposing viewpoints or challenging commonly held stereotypes? Is there a way to use the content of the argument to serve your teaching goals? Or, is student learning best served by diffusing the tension and swiftly refocusing students?

When a discussion between students becomes more heated than you would like, you can use the following strategies to transform arguments into productive debate:

- Take a deep breath and **assess what is happening**. Is a student voicing frustration? Is a student expressing a heartfelt opinion? Are two students misunderstanding each other?
- Whenever possible, **encourage students to discuss ideas, not individuals**, in the classroom.
- If a student attacks another student's idea, ask that student to restate what he or she thinks the other student meant. Make sure that the interpretation is accurate and allow both students to clarify their statements.
- Ask the students to generate all possible evidence for both sides of a debate as a way of suspending judgment and encouraging reflection. Ask students to find counterexamples as well as examples.
- Offer to continue a discussion after class or ask interested students to email you their thoughts if the topic of the argument is not central to the goals of the class session.

When a student challenges or criticizes *you*, take the following steps to stay calm and find some value in the exchange:

- Take a deep breath, and **try to understand the content of the student's complaint or challenge**. Ignore, for a moment, any rudeness; if you respond to the content, the student's attitude and approach may soften.

- **Remain calm and nonjudgmental**, no matter how agitated the student becomes. Your emotional response will only further fuel the student's anger. This is especially true if a student makes a personal attack.
- Don't use your authority as a teacher to simply claim superior knowledge or logic; while in some cases it may be true, it will almost never convince your students, and it discourages their active engagement with the ideas.
- **Use evidence when disagreeing with a student and ask students to provide evidence for their positions.** You may ask other students to evaluate the evidence that you, or the student, provide, if the argument is related to course content.
- **Never get into a power struggle with a student.** As the teacher, you already have power; any retaliation to a student's provocation is likely to be viewed as an abuse of power.
- **If a student is agitated to the point of being unreasonable, ask him or her to carry the grievance to a higher authority.** Do not continue trying to reason with a student who is highly agitated.

### **When One Student Dominates the Classroom**

Over talkative or disruptive students can derail a class. If a student dominates the classroom, try the following strategies to refocus the class and involve other students:

- **Ask other students to comment** on the dominant student's ideas and to propose alternative perspectives.
- **Try participation strategies that involve the whole group**, such as taking a vote, breaking up into pairs, or doing a "round robin," where every student gives a brief response to a question, problem, or thought-provoking quote.
- If the dominant student seems to be well-intentioned, you might meet with the student privately, thank them for their enthusiastic participation, and ask for advice on how to involve other students. Let the student know that you want to distribute participation more evenly, and invite her to be your "collaborator" (e.g., by not answering a question right away to give others an opportunity, or by phrasing comments in a way that encourages others to respond).
- If a student dominates by asking too many disruptive questions, you can ask the full class how many students would prefer that you spend class time answering a specific question. If the class does not vote yes, let the student know that you can answer his question after class or in office hours.

Recognize that **talkative and even disruptive students often think they are displaying enthusiasm and thoughtfulness**; show appreciation for their commitment to the class, even as you help them find an appropriate way to channel it.

## **When Students Remain Silent**

Some days, the silence in a classroom can make you long for a little heated debate. If you have students who never answer a question, offer an opinion, or participate in a demonstration, try these strategies for involving them in the classroom:

- **Make sure that you know the names of your students** and that all the members of a class know each other by name.
- Create a safe environment by responding positively to all student feedback, even if you need to correct a statement. Thank each student for his or her contribution and try to find the seed of a correct or more developed answer in the student's response. Give students the opportunity to revise or clarify their response.
- Prepare students for full-group discussion by having them first discuss the topic in pairs or by spending a few minutes writing out their response to a question.
- **Do not put a silent student on the spot unless you have established a norm of calling on students who have not volunteered.** A student's embarrassment at being singled out may make it even less likely he or she will want to participate in class.
- If you decide to establish a norm of calling on students who have not volunteered responses, **begin with questions that do not have a single correct answer or questions that ask students to make a choice between options.** This makes it more likely that students will be able to answer your question without feeling embarrassment or resentment.
- **Require all students in your class to stop by your office hours at the beginning of the quarter. Getting to know each student may encourage them to participate in class.**
- **Consider asking quiet students to email you their thoughts** before or after class. Some students will readily accept this invitation. If they email before class, you will have an opportunity to draw them into the conversation at an appropriate point. If they email you after class, they have the chance to put together a thoughtful response without the pressure of being in the classroom.

Talking with the student privately can also help. **Reasons for being silent vary.** A student may simply enjoy listening. Another may lack the confidence to contribute. Some students have quiet personalities; others may be undergoing personal difficulties that inhibit their participation. Some may be unprepared and embarrassed to admit it. Others may come from an educational background that discouraged active participation. Even after you gently encourage them to speak, they may remain silent. This is their right, and ultimately you must respect their privacy.