



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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Time to Reflect: Common Teaching Challenges and Solutions

Because we are in the middle of the current academic year and on the precipice of the Spring 2019 semester, now is a perfect time to reflect on best teaching practices related to classroom management. Although instructors never hope for negative interactions with students, it is inevitable that an uncomfortable hiccup or two will occur over the course of the academic year. As not only an instructor, but also a classroom manager, it is important for educators to learn from past mistakes and make adjustments to their classroom management strategies going forward. This article identifies common challenges to classroom management and provides various techniques to overcome them in order to create a positive and productive environment in your classroom.

Common Challenge One: Students Arrive Late to Class

Solution: Be Clear in Your Syllabus' Tardiness Policy, and Be Firm About It

Students always test what you will allow when it comes to late arrivals to class meetings. As such, it is imperative that you have a clear policy on tardiness in your syllabus and, most importantly, that you firmly enforce this policy without any lenience. If you allow one student to be late, then all students will expect that they can be late as well. Some instructors are very strict and will not allow students to enter the classroom if they arrive at any time past the official start of class. While this technique certainly sends a strong message, it does not allow students who may have had a genuine emergency, and consequently arrive a bit tardy, to attend class. A common policy on tardiness that is fairer, and fairly easy to enforce, is to designate that two instances of tardiness equal one absence. Make sure, however, that students know what your grace period is. For example, if a class begins at 9:00 a.m., be clear that arriving after 9:01 a.m. or 9:05 a.m. (or whatever grace period you allow) is considered late.

If you ever feel hesitant about enforcing your tardy policy (or any other classroom rule for that matter), remember the following metaphor: "If someone is supposed to run, but you allow him to walk, he will walk. If you allow walking, he will sit. If you allow sitting, he will lie down." While not all students will take the easy path, most individuals prefer comfort over discipline. You have to set the standard for your students and stick to upholding it.

Common Challenge Two: Students Leave Class Early

Solution: Deduct From Attendance Records

A variation on students arriving late to class is students leaving early from class. Hopefully you do not have a student who is arriving late and leaving early. If this is ever the case, you definitely want to have a one-on-one conversation with the student, especially if either is a routine occurrence! Although it is less likely for students to leave class early, it *will* happen during your teaching career. The solution here is again to make sure that your syllabus provides for the possibility of early exits. My recommendation is to penalize leaving class early in the same way you would address a tardy arrival. This way, you will not have to remember different policies for different situations that both involve students missing class.

Common Challenge Three: Packing Up Before Class Ends

Solution: Cue Students to Pack

For some reason, college students often pack up to leave before class is actually over. It makes you wonder how they are ever late to other classes! Regardless, you have no doubt noticed this strange, contagious phenomenon: when one student starts packing up, suddenly everyone is closing their notebooks and textbooks and stuffing belongings into book bags. The solution for this bad habit is to tell your students that you will always provide them adequate time to pack up before class is over, but that they should not be doing so before your cue. In addition, you must verbally identify any instance of early packing in your classroom or else students will think that their haste to leave does not bother you or that you allow it. Of course if early packing up truly does not bother you, there is no need to acknowledge it. However, consider how students lose focus when there is even the smallest disturbance during class before deciding not to address early packing in your course procedures.

Common Challenge Four: Student Complaints

Solution: Be Proactive and Creative About Handling Complaints

Students complain. If you let them, they will complain about the weather, other students, their families, their jobs, their spouses or significant others, and other areas of their personal lives. However, you have to discern which of these personal complaints actually hold merit. Many student complaints are trivial, and those you can politely redirect toward more productive considerations.

Some complaints need to be taken seriously, though, especially if they involve any physical or emotional harm to the student. In such cases, follow your college's procedures for reporting concerns about student welfare.

Students will occasionally complain, either directly or indirectly, about you and your class. Try not to take these grumblings as personal attacks. Often students complain about a class when they are not performing well and feel pressure. Assure any student who you suspect is complaining due to anxiety over academic performance that you are committed to his or her success, but that learning is a partnership and the student must also assume some responsibility for academic achievement.

Complaining will not alter a grading policy or an assignment grade, though students do not always realize that. When a student complains again and again about your grading policy or unfair marks on assignments, seek the support of your department chair or dean. Students are savvy and will work their way up your department's organizational chart if they are committed to a better grade. You want to be sure your supervisor is informed in advance of a forthcoming conversation with a disgruntled student.

A creative solution for student complaints about class policies or procedures is to create an "excuse card" that students can use for unforeseen circumstances. This forgiveness option should only be given to students to use once each semester. You might also consider some original ways to incentivize professional and responsible student behavior, such as providing extra credit points, sending an email or note to specific students to show your appreciation of their exemplary conduct, or nominating standout students for scholarships or awards. Whichever way you decide to recognize or reward a student, be sure not to embarrass that individual. It will have the opposite effect of what you intend to convey in your recognition.

Common Challenge Five: Focusing Student Discussion

Solution: Provide Structure by Using Tried and True Discussion Frameworks

Ideally, students have read assigned material and taken notes before class and are excited to discuss concepts and ideas with their classmates. However, the reality is usually the opposite, which leads to unstructured classroom discussions. Off-the-cuff classroom discussions pose several challenges:

1. First, not all students willingly participate in classroom discussions and, as a result, conversations become dominated by the small number of students who have most familiarized themselves with the class material.
2. Second, unstructured classroom discussions can easily lose focus. Students tend to like discussing course concepts within a personal framework (that is, they like to talk about themselves) and will quickly lose focus if you allow them to. While it is great for students to relate course

material to themselves, ultimately it is your job to ensure that all students are understanding the class material and meeting learning objectives. Both goals are largely accomplished through well-defined and on-topic discussions.

3. Third, students need to be taught how to engage in productive classroom discussions. At the beginning of your course, you will have to model appropriate contributions and be strategically involved in organizing and supporting discussions.

The solution for each of these obstacles is to provide structure to classroom discussions. A common discussion design is the fishbowl conversation. In this arrangement, half of your students are engaged in a discussion guided by instructor prompts. The other students are responsible for observing one of their classmates and critiquing his or her contributions to the discussion. After a designated amount of time, students swap roles so those who were observing the discussion from outside now take part in the discussion, and those who were in the discussion are now observing it from outside. The advantage of this structure is that students are immersed in the discussion the whole time, whether or not they are actively participating in it. Students are also gaining insight into what is or is not useful when contributing to discussions and can better form their own responses in the future. Another discussion strategy that requires critical thinking and contribution is to use a variation of the debate structure, such as Philosophical Chairs. In this exercise, students are given an issue to argue for or against. The design is also effective for promoting respectful dialogue and mutual understanding. If you want to encourage all students to participate in class discussions, the snowball technique (sometimes called a pyramid discussion) is a great method. In this format, students begin by discussing a thought-provoking question related to the course material with a partner. Then, after two or three minutes, those pairs form a group of four students and the larger groups discuss the topic for another two to three minutes. This process continues until the entire class comes together for one large discussion.

Regardless of the structured discussion format you decide to try in your classroom, a word of caution is to make sure you do not overuse structured discussions—they will quickly lose their novelty and become unengaging if employed too often. Once your students become more comfortable with sharing their ideas and how to share them effectively, and with the right discussion questions to guide conversation, an ordinary class discussion format can become just as effective as structured models.

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