

# Effective Classroom Management

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The following includes tips and advice for managing your classroom, that is, maintaining civility and reinforcing policies that you have set. It also discusses the importance of setting those policies from the outset. Using these guidelines, it is possible to effectively manage your classroom without being perceived as heavy-handed or "unfriendly."

## **Aim for an Atmosphere of Mutual Respect**

Drew Appleby of Marian College conducted a study in 1990 , in which he distributed surveys to determine which student behaviors most irritated college teachers, and which teacher behaviors most irritated students in their classes. He found that the results of his were fairly consistent. The students whose behavior most irritated teachers he classified as "immature and inattentive," while the teachers who were most irritating to students were described as "unempathetic and poor communicators" (44). One of the most important conclusions coming out of this study is that poor behavior on the part of a teacher can result in poor behavior of the students, and vice-versa. By making students aware of the effect of their behavior on the teacher and the classroom, in addition to teachers making an effort to eliminate negative behavior of their own, instructors can improve the environment and the classroom experience. Appleby writes, "With the establishment of such mutual insight, the teaching/learning process would surely improve for both generations of participants, and student evaluation of faculty, so heavily affected by empathy and communication skills, might be more positive" (45).

To help establish an atmosphere of mutual respect, it is a good idea to provide your students with a written description of the kind of classroom environment you'd like to have. This description (or set of guidelines) should use a positive tone to inform your students about not only what you expect from them, but what you promise to do yourself. Avoid structuring it like a list of rules, and try to avoid the use of negatives such as "Don't do X" or "There will be serious consequences if you do not X." Instead, tell them what your vision is, even if it is "ideal." One example of such a statement is provided.

(See Guidelines for Courtesy and Respect at the end of this article.)

This sample comes from Angela McGlynn's book, *Successful Beginnings for College Teachers* (Madison: Atwood, 2001). It can easily be adapted to your own needs.

## **Make Your Expectations Clear**

Although, as the first guideline tells you, it is helpful to establish a mutually respectful atmosphere, it is also important to have structure and clear expectations for your students. There is no way of getting around the fact that you are the teacher of the class, and they are your students. If they have no sense of your authority in the classroom, you will be unable to effectively manage your class (and you will probably have a difficult time gaining respect).

Authority is an unpopular word with many, and it can take on negative connotations. In this case, I use "authority" to mean "person in charge," in the sense of having a leadership role in the classroom (not to mention the power to assign passing or failing grades), but not to mean someone who is heavy-handed or strict.

In any case, it is reasonable for you to be the authority figure in the classroom in terms of setting the rules and organizing & guiding the activities of the students for the course. However, it is possible to have a good rapport with your class while still being "the person in charge." Setting clear goals and expectations, and writing and distributing them to students, will help you to avoid some of these problems by providing an objective source of the rules. If a student does not live up to an expectation or does not follow a guideline, the teacher need only refer to the written rules as the ultimate authority (with more power than even the teacher who wrote them). Even if the instructor is him- or herself tempted to bend or overlook a policy for the sake of a student, the written rules can serve as a reminder that these are policies that must apply equally to each and every student. Without these clear policies, the teacher will constantly be in a position of having to make quick judgments for every new student and situation that is causing a disruption in the teaching and learning process.

### **Deal Directly & Immediately With Incivility**

It is sometimes tempting to ignore the student who is sleeping in the back of the class, reading the newspaper, or talking with a friend instead of paying attention to the lesson. But by doing this, you are sending the message that you do not care whether they engage in that behavior or not, and you'll find it happening more and more. I have sat in on classes where students were openly reading novels and doing crossword puzzles, or carrying on three-way conversations in the middle of a small class about the latest movies they'd seen, and the teacher (who was aware of the behavior), did nothing. It was likely that these students had not started out being so rude; during the first week or two they had probably just continued to glance at a newspaper for a minute or two after the class had been called to order, or whispered a non-class related comment to the person next to them during a lull in the lecture. But in one class that I have observed, the students had discovered that the teacher would not call them on this behavior, and that they could do even more. In fact, they had learned, they could do just about whatever they wanted to do in

the classroom, with no consequences. This was a class without management.

As I told the instructor of the class mentioned in the previous paragraph, it is possible to discourage uncivil behavior without being directly confrontational. Direct confrontation with the student in front of the class, which may embarrass the student or make them feel "picked on," can backfire in several ways. First, the student who was confronted may feel threatened, and may not be motivated to make positive behavioral changes. In addition, you risk alienating the other students as well, who may feel empathy for the embarrassed student and angry toward you. Finally, discussing a student's behavior in front of others, like discussing grade issues, can be considered a breach of privacy rights. You may be letting yourself in for greater trouble if you do this. (You may, however, choose to speak directly to the student privately, after the class is over or during your office hours.)

**Here are some non-confrontational ways of dealing with uncivil behavior in class:**

When students have side-conversations:

- a. state generally: "Please remember that only one person should speak at a time"
- b. look toward the students who are talking, but continue your lecture
- c. walk toward the students who are talking, but continue your lecture
- d. ask a question to someone sitting near them
- e. talk to them privately after class

When students read, do crossword puzzles, or do work for other classes:

- a. look or walk in their direction as you teach (this lets them know you are aware of them)
- b. ask the class to write down the answer to a question you pose
- c. break the class into pairs or groups and ask them to discuss, or work out a problem

When students sleep in class:

- a. walk and talk in their general direction, or make your voice louder (often the change in volume/distance will cause the student to wake up)
- b. ask a question of the student next to the student who is sleeping

c. ask the class to do an activity

d. speak to the student privately after class - sometimes there is an underlying reason for the tiredness, such as stress or a heavy workload, that may be temporary. You may be able to refer the student to an advisor or campus counselor who could help them balance their activities or manage their time better.

If you are consistent with the way you handle uncivil or inappropriate behavior in your classroom, and if you set a good example yourself, you will find that your students will begin to follow the guidelines you have set, and may even help you to enforce them. (Keep in mind, however, that continued behavior problems in the classroom should be reported to your department head, and if you encounter any behavior that you deem "seriously disruptive" you have the authority to temporarily remove the student from your class, after which an informal hearing will be convened to determine the outcome. See Section 21 of the Student Rules for more information.)

I know that I have been successful when my students begin to call me on my behavior, and to remind me of the procedures that I have set down for us all. In my class, for example, when a student is absent I ask that they send me a memo to explain the reason. By mid-semester, if I am sick and have to miss a class, at least one student will typically remind me that a memo is expected (which I have composed, and sent to the class as an email).

The classroom is a microcosm of society (within the larger community of the university), and like society it requires some rules and disciplines in order to function smoothly. At the basis of these rules is a two-way respect, the students for teacher and the teacher for the students. The teacher is the model for student behavior as well as the administrator of it, but to be effective the teacher must learn when and how to enforce the rules and guidelines of the classroom. The primary job of the teacher is not to be a parent or enforcer, but to be an educator. However, effective learning will not take place if the teacher does not address issues of civility and respectful behavior.

{Worst case scenarios? Violence}

Sources:

Appleby, Drew C. "Faculty and Student Perceptions of Irritating Behaviors in the College Classroom." *Journal of Staff, Professional and Organizational Development* 8 (1990): 41-46.

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Johnson, David W., Roger T. Johnson and Karl A. Smith. *Active Learning: Cooperation in the College Classroom*. Edina, MN: Interaction Book Company,

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### Guidelines for Courtesy and Respect

I would like to welcome all students into an environment that creates a sense of community, pride, courtesy and respect; we are all here to work cooperatively and to learn together.

In order to create a smooth and harmonious learning community, please make every attempt to come to all the class sessions, to come to class on time, and to stay until the end of the meeting (unless you have informed me that you must leave early). There may be a time when you are unavoidably late for class. In that case, please come into the room quietly and choose a seat closest to the entrance. Please see me after class to record your lateness; otherwise you will be marked absent. (Please note that two lateness's to a class will be considered the equivalent of one absence, and that poor attendance to class may result in a ten-point penalty, a letter-grade penalty, or withdrawal from the course -- see the syllabus for details.)

Please turn off all cell phones and beepers prior to class unless you have informed me that you are, for example, an EMT or a firefighter, or that you are waiting for a personal emergency call.

Once the class session has begun, please do not leave the room and then re-enter unless it is an emergency. If you miss a class meeting for any reason, you are responsible for all material covered, for announcements made in your absence, and for acquiring any materials that may have been distributed in class.

It is important that we are all able to stay focused on the class lecture/discussion. For this reason, only one person at a time in the class should be speaking. Side conversations are distracting for surrounding students and for me. As you can see, simple norms of courtesy should be sufficient to have our class run in the best interests of all of us. Thank you in advance for your cooperation.

Source:

McGlynn, Angela Provitera. *Successful Beginnings for College Teaching*. Madison: Atwood, 2001. 107.