

Managing "Difficult" Students In the Online Classroom

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While the range of student personalities and problems we encounter in the online classroom (the quiet ones, the nurturers, the take-charge types, the class clowns, and the imaginative procrastinators) remains pretty much the same as that which we see in the face to face classroom, there are a few aspects of the online environment that create new opportunities for the "usual suspects" to manifest their trademark styles.

Let's start out with a cautionary note—take a deep breath and don't overact to student behavior in the online classroom—many students actually do not realize that they are being obnoxious or rude. This is particularly true of students who may spend a lot of their free time in instant messaging and public chat boards—they just may not realize that their banter can seem flippant or rude in the context of an online classroom.

While one should assume the best intentions, it is also important to note that even one student has the potential to spoil the atmosphere for the entire class. So it pays to be watchful and work to quickly forestall any problems that arise in the classroom. While you want to sensitively attend to the individual student, you must also be mindful of your responsibility to the rest of the students. The following, adapted from Chapter 11 of *Teaching Online: A Practical Guide** provides some pointers for recognizing and resolving some of the difficulties you may encounter:

Noisy Students

This seems like an oxymoron in the largely asynchronous, text-based communication classroom. But a noisy student, much like his or her face to face counterpart, spends a good deal of time and energy trying to distract others, raising issues that are only tangentially related to the topics under discussion. Such students often create new topic threads when only a reply is really called for and pepper existing discussion threads with inane comments.

The noisy student often wants a bit of personal attention and a good way to deal with this is to give him or her a nod via personal email. Also, in the public discussion area, acknowledge the student and steer him or her back on track, *"What you say about X is interesting, Joe, but how would you respond to Ian's comment about Y?"* or *"This is an interesting point—we may be able to take it up later, in week 5."*

There are ways to deal effectively with the noisy student. Be gentle and remember that the noisy student may prove to be your salvation when the classroom discussion hits the doldrums and you desperately need someone to respond to your prodding!

Disruptive Students

A disruptive student is one who is seemingly determined to disturb the actual functioning of the course. He or she may attempt to take over the class by commandeering the discussion and questioning the major thrust of your course or some essential aspect of it in the public forum. He or she may answer questions addressed to you, contradict you, stage a "mutiny" among the students and in some cases, become abusive. Few students will display such

behavior in the face-to-face classroom, but more seem emboldened to do so online. Luckily, these are few and far in between—nonetheless, encountering such students can be devastating to the morale and confidence of even a veteran online instructor. It's important to achieve a balance between asserting your authority in the classroom and overreacting to a student provocation.

In the most extreme cases, if a student is abusive, threatening or uses foul language, you should immediately notify your administrator. Copy and save all communications with the student.

However, there are many disruptions that do not rise to that level or that can be diverted and dissolved before they rise to that level. In fact, there are many creative ways in which students can be disruptive—here are two of the varieties you may encounter and some suggestions about how to manage your interaction with them in the classroom. Please note that these are composite examples, not actual case histories.

Example #1, The Know-it-All

Midway through a course, one of the students, Janet, who had some real-world experience in the subject, began to answer questions that were addressed to the instructor. At first the instructor had no problem with this, thinking Janet had some good tips for classmates and so the instructor simply acknowledged Janet's comments and then added her own remarks. At some point, however, Janet began contradicting the instructor's information, offered her own website as a superior reference and suggested that students use it as their guide.

Rather than responding directly to Janet's contradictory message, the instructor simply reaffirmed the information to all students,

"Although there may be some disagreement by scholars in the field on the details, the general principle I enunciated remains sound and is the one I would like you to use in this course."

Janet wasn't directly mentioned, and she was able to save face; yet the instructor reasserted the primacy of her authority and refocused students on the objectives of the course.

Example #2, The Belligerent Student Who Hasn't Kept Up

Andy barely participated during the first part of Professor B's course, but he seemed suddenly to reappear, apparently angry that he was finding it hard to catch up with the class. He posted angry messages in the public classroom that reflected his very real frustration arising from his lack of understanding of what was going on in the class.

"What's this supposed to be about?"

"I don't get it. What's the point of this assignment?"

In a case like this, Professor B should ignore the emotion in Andy's comments in the classroom but still needs to address the fact that Andy has posted in the public area. The professor should post objective, concrete suggestions in reply:

"This concerns Lesson 5. You might find pages 10-25 the most useful."

"Andy, as I mentioned in my previous lecture, this assignment asks you to focus your attention on Problem 2. See the guidelines for Assignment #1 in the syllabus. All students: If you have specific questions on this assignment, please feel free to post your questions here."

But Professor B needs to follow this up by emailing this student and being supportive, while still calling him to account.

"Andy, I have noted your expressions of frustration in the classroom and have responded. Since you were somewhat late getting started in the class, you may need to go back and review the lessons and guidelines. If you need further help, just email me and I will try to assist you."

The subtext of this message is:

I can see you are frustrated, and that may be due to the fact that you didn't keep up with the work. I think you can do it—go back and try again. If you really don't understand after making a decent effort, I'm here to help.

A good principle to follow in communicating with disruptive students is to rely on formality—stick to the question or issue and do not be drawn in by personal comments and challenges. Formality in online communications signifies seriousness, clarity and firmness to students. It is particularly effective when it contrasts with an otherwise casual instructor tone.

In closing, it's reassuring to note that most students are motivated to do well in their courses and will appreciate your efforts to reach out to them. Keep your focus on the class as a whole and that will help you fine-tune your response to individual students. There is great satisfaction to be derived in finally connecting with a "difficult" student, and successfully working through issues with him or her will allow you to maintain a positive learning environment for all your students.

* Susan Ko and Steve Rossen. [Teaching Online: A Practical Guide](#). Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004.