Dealing with Challenging Situations in the Classroom
Manuel Dias, Centre for University Teaching

Classroom management requires good presentation, encouragement, and maintaining a respectful environment.

You have researched your topic and planned your lesson, but once you enter the classroom, another variable comes into consideration: the students! What can you do to create a positive learning atmosphere? How do you handle challenging situations that sometimes occur? Even with good preparation, you may still run into challenging situations (e.g. unruly students, sensitive discussion topics). What strategies will you use to handle these situations?

### What is classroom management?

Classroom management is a difficult concept to define because it includes a number of aspects related to teaching.

Classroom management requires establishing a positive learning environment, which includes being aware of the students’ emotional experience, leading the class effectively, good planning and time management, and making an impact on all students. These things can be achieved through your presentation, encouragement, teaching techniques, and maintaining a respectful environment (Academy of Art University – Faculty Resources, 2006).

#### A. Historical perspective

Forty years ago, classroom management was associated with discipline and separate from learning itself. In particular, this idea was developed in schools for students between the ages of five and 17. Teaching strategies were developed and implemented without taking group management into account (to maintain discipline, difficult cases). Classroom management and teaching were thus seen as two separate things.

A change took place in the 1980s, when research changed our way of thinking about classroom management. Beginning in this era, the management and teaching were no longer kept separate, but instead seen as intertwined and complex. Classroom management strategies reflect...
the important aspects of a professor’s values and beliefs with respect to course content and learning.

B. Striking a balance

It is important to understand that classroom management is not a merely a component of teaching; there is no magic formula. There are, however, research-based approaches that can be considered. Good classroom management requires striking a balance between the various major approaches (Boyle and Rothstein, 2008). This means taking the time to reflect on and anticipate unexpected situations in the classroom environment.

The following is a list of approaches or positions that you might consider for your class.

Control versus flexibility
This is the difference between exercising strict control over classroom behaviour and work versus being open and flexible to requests from students and their working methods. Being attentive to the students is appreciated and shows that you are interested in their views. However, do not go to the extreme and lose sight of your initial intentions by responding only to requests from students. You should strike a balance and stay focused on what you have planned, while remaining attentive and ready to make adjustments or to relax certain rules if it can contribute to student learning.

Open versus strict
It is important to create a welcoming environment where students play an active role in their learning (e.g. sharing their opinions and experiences) versus a strict environment with limited participation from them.

Organization, interest, and teaching rhythm or adaptation
Being willing to modify your lesson plan according to the needs of students compared to maintaining the lesson plan without taking the needs or interests of students into consideration.

Enforcing strict rules versus being accommodating
Students need to know what is expected of them. You need to establish a strict work environment with strict rules for the course from the start rather than let the course begin and seeing along the way that stricter rules will need to be put in place to continue.

From the first class, you can let students know which behaviours are not acceptable in your course (eating in class, keeping their phones turned on, talking at inappropriate times, etc.). In some teaching contexts, you have no choice but to lay down strict rules for safety reasons (for example, if your students are doing laboratory work). This way, you empower your students and will be able to better cope with challenging situations when they appear as a result.

These aspects depend on your initial attitude: you will need to show interest and compassion for your students. It is also important to strike a balance between a course that will appeal to students while also engaging them in further reflection. You should try to strike a balance within this approach to feel secure in what
you ask of students while maintaining a pleasant classroom environment.
The following case studies will help you reflect on the strategies that you could use to deal with challenging situations in class in order to maintain group cohesion.

Reflection: Case studies

Situation 1

Context: You are leading a group discussion about sports in popular culture. Students discuss Sport Canada’s promotional strategy for the Vancouver Olympics, particularly athlete profiles on television.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student A</th>
<th>Student B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Argues that Sport Canada has a limited budget for advertising and should target athletes such as Sidney Crosby, who could be models for Canadian youth and present an image of masculinity and good sportsmanship.</td>
<td>Suggests in response that a figure skater devoted to his sport and active in his community could be an equally good role model for a young boy as Sidney Crosby.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student A</th>
<th>Student B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Is outraged by his classmate’s suggestion. Argues fiercely that skaters do not deserve to be used as an example because they are not manly, and therefore are not good role models for young boys. The student uses intolerant language, ridicules his classmate’s opinion and demonstrates a closed-minded attitude.</td>
<td>Is offended because he or she thought the group discussion was a place of tolerance and respect. The student is concerned that the TA is not doing enough to maintain an open and positive classroom climate.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Situation 2

Context: You are reviewing an important concept that will be on the exam. You see that half the class is not listening, something that has happened before during the session. Many students are talking, some are listening to their iPods, and others are using their computers to update their Facebook pages, which distracts other students who are trying to listen.

- What could happen if you do nothing?
- What should you avoid doing?
- What can you do to resolve the situation now that it has happened?
- What could you have done to prevent this from happening?
Responding to inappropriate behaviour

Inappropriate behaviour may vary depending on the teaching context and the group of students. The following are some strategies that may help you manage these situations. First, it is important to remain calm and maintain control of the group. Keeping your cool will give you the respect of students who can exert social pressure on disruptive students (Nilson, p.79).

You may decide to settle the dispute after class in order to not disturb the entire class or to address it in front of all the students to ensure that it is only a single case.

You can also seek help from your supervisor to make sure you find an effective solution to the problem.

A few suggestions

Center for Teaching and Learning – UNCC (2008)
- Establish initial rules
- Shape appropriate behaviour
- Keep the attention of students

Kozantis (2005)
- Establish clear expectations
- Respect students
- Be welcoming and available
- Maintain a good mood
- Call students by their first name
- Establish an appropriate pace
- Use humour

Academy of Art University (2006)
- Develop skills for collaborative and active learning
- Establish clear learning outcomes
- Re-reference information on a continuous basis
- Call all students by their first name during class
- Teach for a variety of learning styles and levels of intelligence
- Make learning understandable by relating to the experiences of students
- Provide frequent feedback focused on the positive aspects
- Provide guidance and work both orally and in writing
- Shape expected behaviour
- Provide class time for students for practical work

Boyle and Rothstein (2008)
- Get the attention of students
- Develop an effective pace
- Plan transitions
- Choose the right level of difficulty
- Manage the course continuously
- Reply confidently when a problem occurs
Overall recommendations

The various authors cited in the previous section give five recommendations that they consider important for effective classroom management.

Your attitude

The attitude in class is essential to establishing a positive work environment. This means smiling, being cheerful, enthusiastic about the content and towards students, staying positive, and so on. Doing these things will also serve to keep your students’ attention. It is also important to pay attention to your voice (your intonation, pace of speech), as well as gestures (movements in the classroom, facial expressions). As a teaching assistant, you will not have the same authority as that of the professor, making the attitude you bring to class essential to its success.

Your behaviour

It is important at the beginning of the course to clearly communicate to students what behaviour is tolerated and what is not. As an instructor, you must lead by example, which includes being on time, being prepared and organized, quickly correcting student work, and carefully listening to questions and comments from students. This will allow you to demonstrate acceptable behaviours that students will be able to observe and follow.

In addition, arriving late to class, not attending office hours, not getting to know the students and talking to the blackboard are the professor and teaching assistant behaviours that most irritate students, according to a survey conducted by the Teaching Assistant Program at Michigan State University, 2008; Nilson, p.76.

Be prepared

By preparing a specific lesson plan, you will be able to think about possible challenging situations and anticipate them; this can be done through well-organized and structured lessons, presenting concepts in a structured way and thinking about transitions, presenting content in an interesting and motivating way, etc.

Your teaching approach

It is important to keep the attention of your audience, which tends to decrease after 15 to 20 minutes. You should therefore consider active learning using a variety of activities and work methods through the use of various assessment tools. This way you can anticipate potential bad behaviour.

Your audience

As an instructor, you should pay attention to your students and keep your focus on them. By doing so, you will be able to identify students who are struggling to understand the content and solve problems before they escalate.

Conclusion

It is important that you take a collaborative approach with your class and listen to your students. Moreover, you should engage with students in the learning process and in establishing expectations for classroom behaviour. This requires collaboration with colleagues. You’re not alone. Discuss new proactive strategies to engage the class and help ensure that difficult situations can be controlled when they arise.
Be curious about your subject of study. Your curiosity and enthusiasm will be contagious to the extent that you will engage your students in learning experiences. Be curious about your students. Make sure to get to know their names, and especially to know the students with whom you feel no connection at first, whose views are sometimes very different from your own.

This leads us to the issue of being attentive, or having a genuine interest in your students even when you do not necessarily agree with them. Being attentive is essential to creating a positive classroom environment and will help to better manage difficult situations when they arise, despite the efforts made to be proactive. Be attentive to yourself and also bear in mind that all teachers, even the experienced ones, have to cope with difficult situations (Waterhouse, 2011).

**Further Reading**


