

Classroom Decorum

A possibly helpful distinction in considering boorish classroom behaviour is that made in a sociological study of the subjects of disrespectful disruption and insolent inattention (Caboni).

Disrespectful disruption refers to an active behavior in which a student engages that impedes learning by other members of a class. Examples include receiving cell phone calls, leaving class before being excused by the instructor, and talking instead of listening.

Insolent inattention refers to the inability or unwillingness to pay attention to classroom activities. Examples include students who attend class intoxicated and thus unable to participate, students who are disengaged (sleeping, head down on desk, surfing the Internet, working on other things while). While both disrespectful disruption and insolent inattention disturb the classroom environment, the first is active and the second is passive. A sociological study found that student social norms (“peer pressure”) reinforce “insolent” inattention but not disrespectful disruption (Caboni). Quite likely the “insolent” part of the label is from the instructors point of view, whereas students may feel that classmates should be able to do whatever they want as long as they aren’t bothering others.

One “take-away” is that you may be able to tap the power of peer pressure to help deal with disruptive behaviour, but not student disengagement. On the first day of class, talk to students about what they feel are reasonable conduct rules with respect to such things late arrivals, early departures, talking in class, smart phone and tablet use, Internet surfing, etc (see [https://wikis.unb.ca/sew/index.php/Laptops, Cell Phones and Facebook-Distraction or Course Tool%3F](https://wikis.unb.ca/sew/index.php/Laptops,_Cell_Phones_and_Facebook-Distraction_or_Course_Tool%3F), UNB login required). This will set expectations from the start. Also, students tend to be more invested in something when they have had input that has been taken seriously, and also the knowledge that disruptive behaviour bothers fellow students and not just the instructor may help students be more considerate.

Inattention and disengagement have to be addressed in teaching methods, the subject of other articles in this series.

You can start by making students aware of UNB’s Student Disciplinary Code:

Class Attendance Policy:

<http://www.unb.ca/academics/calendar/undergraduate/current/regulations/universitywideacademicregulations/i-generalcourse regulation/a.classattendance.html>

Classroom decorum:

<http://www.unb.ca/academics/calendar/undergraduate/current/regulations/universitywideacademicregulations/i-generalcourse regulation/b.classroomlabclinicalfieldworkandsafetydecorum.html>

UNB General Regulations on Conduct: <http://www.unb.ca/secretariat/students/student-discipline.html#intro>

Some Practical Tips

Be proactive—reduce conflict by building your credibility from the start. Your credibility is established on the first day of class and is evaluated continuously from class to class. Start by explaining your experience with the subject, your research, relevant work experience, and your experience as a student. Always be prepared for lectures and share the lecture goals with students. Maintain credibility by being demonstrably organized, enthusiastic and knowledgeable about the subject, and treating students fairly. You don't have to be perfect—if you make a substantial effort and care about student success, students will find you credible. With that as a basis, if you then make a mistake or don't know the answer to a question, it won't detract from your credibility, especially if you acknowledge the mistake or knowledge gap and promise to get the required information as soon as possible. Defensiveness detracts from credibility and creates conflict.

Some instructors have a “learning contract” in their syllabi that specifies both what the instructor expects of students and what students can expect from instructors. Follow this link for an example (UNB login required): [https://wikis.unb.ca/sew/index.php/Integrity: Academic and Political - A Letter to My Students](https://wikis.unb.ca/sew/index.php/Integrity:_Academic_and_Political_-_A_Letter_to_My_Students).

Work at having a helpful rapport with students. Students are more positive about the instructor and learning experience when they feel that their instructors care about them. Try to use students' names whenever possible (e.g., in lectures and when grading assignments or papers). Be available before and after class to answer questions and chat informally.

Be as dynamic as possible. There is no single, best teaching style. Teaching in a sense is information mediated by personality, so over time you develop a style that fits your context and personality. Try to make it as dynamic as possible while being true to your personality. Rehearse the presentation of main points of a lecture, at least until you develop a comfort level acceptable to you, to make things as smooth as possible. Enthusiasm for your subject also goes a long way to creating reciprocal engagement on the part of students. Using teaching methods that require interaction with students, such as question-and-answer and peer instruction can reduce disengagement and disruptive behaviour. You can use wireless clickers or a class Twitter page to integrate mobile technology into your teaching methods to reduce distraction from students' “gadgets.”

Anticipate problems at the back of the room. Tell students that research shows that students who sit in the front earn higher grades (Cuseo). Ask students to change seats periodically, asking those at the back to sit near the front in the next class.

Move around the class. Move near disruptive students while teaching, before talking to them. Don't shame and humiliate, and frame things so there is an easy, face-saving way for them to comply with

appropriate behaviour expectations. State calmly the behaviour and how it's disruptive and state expectations for that area, and ask them to comply.

Learn late arrivers' names and ask them content questions as they get settled.

Stop talking and sit down when you encounter inappropriate behaviour, some instructors advise. It may take a minute or two for things to quiet down. The worst offenders are typically the last ones left talking, but once the majority of the class has gone quiet their prattle stands out as very obvious, and they become aware of their own voices and stop. If you have a particularly recalcitrant group and they did not quiet down after a couple of minutes, inform them that the class is not going to continue, give the reason, state the conditions for the class to return, and leave. Perhaps appoint one of the properly behaved students to come and inform me when the class was ready to continue under more favourable conditions. For a more complete discussion with suggestions from UNB instructors, see (UNB login required): https://wikis.unb.ca/sew/index.php/Large_Class_Disruptive_Students_Scenario.

Dealing with Conflict Situations

Unfortunately, not all conflicts can be avoided with proactive measures.

Don't take it personally. Conflict creates feeling of frustration, anger, upset and sense of being threatened. Such emotions can reduce your ability to respond effectively. Think about these feelings differently, as a means to avoid having them keep you from responding appropriately. Rather than thinking, "What a jerk" or feeling threatened because "This person is attacking my credibility", you could think, "I wonder why that student is so upset? I need to figure out what the problem is—there must be some pertinent fact about the situation I don't know and if I knew them, I'd understand the situation better." Not taking it personally helps you remain calm and effective.

Choose when and where to deal with the situation. Responding immediately to disruptive behaviour shows that you are attentive to students' needs and reinforces your expectations for student behaviour. Pause what you are doing, make eye contact with disruptive students, and asking if there is a problem you can help resolve. However, serious disagreements can derail the class and undermine your authority, so in such situations it is better to acknowledge that there is a disagreement that requires resolution and set a time to meet outside of class, in a neutral location if necessary, to discuss it. If the student(s) are still disruptive, ask them to leave the class.

Instructors certainly have the right to eject disturbers from a class, especially after they've been warned at least once, or refuse to leave when asked. You can call security to have students physically removed if necessary. (453-4830)

Demonstrate that you are listening and being fair when you meet with students to resolve disagreements. Show respect for them by listening, without interruption, to their perspectives and keeping a positive tone, and asking open-ended questions that focus on the situation or behaviour, without implying anything judgmental about the student.

Find a balance between protecting student privacy (so others cannot overhear the conversation) but being visible by others, to have third party witnesses who can support you if you are falsely accused of inappropriate behaviour. For example, keeping your office door open will only be appropriate if the conversation cannot be overheard by people who work nearby. The ideal situation is to meet in a room with glass walls through which people can see but not hear. Another possibility is to offer to let the student bring a friend as an observer in return for letting you have a colleague present.

Consider the possibility that you have misunderstood or misinterpreted something. Check your understanding of their assertions by rephrasing them in your own words and asking them to correct any misunderstandings or to clarify anything not fully understood. Use neutral, non-blaming words. Rephrasing reassures students that you are listening and taking them seriously and that you fully understand the problem.

Once you and they are satisfied that you fully understand the issue, select a course of action that aligns with your teaching goals for the course. Tell both what you have decided and your rationale for making that decision. Then, discuss next steps. For example, let's say the dispute was over a student talking and joking with nearby students while you are lecturing, and the students' reaction to your "calling them on it" during class was sufficiently hostile to ask them to leave. You met with them afterward, and you let them talk and reflected back what they have said in neutral language to ensure clear understanding of all aspects of the situation. You are then set to give the future course of action. Perhaps they said they were discussing homework from another course because they already knew what you were lecturing on. Explain calmly how that not only you but other students have crafted the behaviour guidelines, and that their behaviour is disruptive not only to you but other students, and that university policy empowers you to make decisions to keep the classroom environment helpful and positive for all students. As a result, they should sit near a door at the back and if they feel they already know the material and if want to talk about other things, they should signal each other quietly and leave without disturbing others. Also, that from your experience, students who think they know a topic often overestimate their level of knowledge and regret it on the next test or assignment, so you recommend that they sit quietly and listen regardless, or volunteer to ask questions about the topic when asked by the instructor.

If your next steps require follow-up on your part, state when the follow-up will take place and what form it will take.

Appeals and Resources

If you were unable to resolve the issue, make them aware of appeals processes <https://www.unb.ca/fredericton/student-services/academics/academic-issues/academic-appeals.html> or refer them to your department's Dean or Chair. In the latter case, let your Dean or Chair know that you have referred students to them and why, so they are not surprised and have had time to think about the situation before they have to deal with it. Direct students to other resources on campus, including counseling or health services which are housed under Student Affairs and Services:

<http://www.unb.ca/fredericton/studentservices/>. It is wise to document details of the discussion soon after the event, including date and time, names of persons involved, your understanding of the issue and your understanding of their interpretation, steps taken to resolve the issue, why it was not accepted. Describe behaviours and be as neutral in tone as possible. Such documentation will be beneficial to you in any appeals process.

References

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- Cuseo, J.; Fecas, V. S.; & Thompson, A. (2007). *Thriving in College & Beyond: Research-Based Strategies for Academic Success and Personal Development*. Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hint.
- Davis, B. G. (2009). *Tools for Teaching*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- University of Waterloo Centre for Teaching Excellence teaching tips, *Conflict Management for Instructors*. Retrieved from <https://uwaterloo.ca/centre-for-teaching-excellence/teaching-resources/teaching-tips/managing-students/setting-tone/conflict-management-instructors>
- Taylor, W. M. (Undated) *Integrity: Academic and Political - A Letter to My Students*. Oakton Community College, Des Plaines, IL