

Building a Learning Culture

Managing a classroom to enhance learning

Alen Amirkhanian's musings

What is the role of faculty in student learning?

1. Creating a stable environment where it is possible to focus and engage in course content
2. Supporting and guiding students through rough patches
3. Engaging, challenging, and inspiring students to learn

What needs to be managed

- Disruptive talking
- Cheating
- Plagiarism
- Late comers, early leavers, and the cafeteria approach
- Distractive use of digital devices/gadgets
- Requests for special treatment or “deal”
- Unprepared students – not done reading/assignment
- Your own preconceptions, prejudices, and behavior

How do you deal with each of these problems?

- Disruptive talking?

Rule: In lectures, no talking unless you are asking a question from the instructor or the instructor has asked you to say something. **Violation of Rule:** You will get 1 warning. Second time you will be asked to leave (and stay out until you are ready to adhere to rule).

Idea: The method of teaching may impact how much disruptive talking takes place. Lecturing and student presentations, where the “disruptive talkers” have to listen, are the most vulnerable times. If they have tasks to do or if it’s a flipped classroom etc., some of these behavioral issues may disappear.

Idea: Set the rules together with the students. This may be helpful for many other problem areas, e.g., cheating, late/early in-out, disruptive use of digital devices, etc.

Important: The disruptive individuals are the super minority. Most of the students are interested and/or are not disruptive. Do not focus on the disruptive ones excessively at the expense of the ones interested.

- Cheating?

Structural solutions for exams, idea #1: Students enter the exam room one-by-one; they place their bags, coats, etc. at the front of the room; they take a pre-assigned seat; seats are spread out, ideally 1 or 2 spaces between each seat and a row between them.

Structural solutions for exams, idea #2: Replace or paint over the clipboards in Large Auditorium and Manoogian Hall. They are the best cheat sheets.

Idea: One instructor says that she gives students many low stakes quizzes and exams. During these low stakes exams, do not allow to discuss or cheat. This gives them a chance to “practice” not cheating when the consequences are insignificant. The expectation is that through this process they will learn to rely on themselves.

Idea: Couple of instructors mentioned that they get students to acknowledge that they are not “cheaters” or students who are caught cheating are called “cheaters.” Research shows labeling someone is more effective in stopping the unwanted behavior than only labeling their actions.

Idea: One instructor uses “adaptive testing” on Moodle. This allows students to know that they’ve made the wrong choice and make another one. While they penalized, the penalty is smaller and the theory is that the student uses that opportunity to learn.

How do you deal with each of these problems?

- Plagiarism

Consideration: Talk to those who teach Freshman English. They have lots of experience with this.

IMPORTANT: Ask for original work. Otherwise they copy/paste and cite resource, technically not making it plagiarism.

- Late comers, early leavers, and the cafeteria approach?

Rule: Zero tolerance.

- Distractive use of digital devices/gadgets

Rule: Zero tolerance.

- Requests for special treatment or “deal”?

Rule: No special deals for any single student. Students should think about their grade during the course and not after the final exam. Student should ask themselves: “What I’m asking, can I realistically expect that the instructor extend the same to everyone in the class?” Even someone with an A would like the chance to an A+. Someone with an A+ will be miffed.

- Unprepared students – not done reading/assignment?

Consideration: Talk to those who teach Freshman English. They have lots of experience with this.

- Student-to-student and student-to-teacher relationships

Consideration: Safety, trust, taking risks, respect; teamwork?, this issue kind of crosses over to Faculty Function #3.

- Your own preconceptions, prejudices, and behavior?

Important: Stop thinking only about students’ evaluations of you and if anyone is going to sign up for your classes next year. Thinking this way can lead to behavior that is too accommodating to the students. If you are clear, consistent and fair about your approach with students, they will respect you. Remember that through your own behavior, you set a reputation.

SUPER IMPORTANT: You have to check your own preconceptions and prejudices.

Suggested principles/approach

- **Set clear rules from the start**
- **Be fair, clear, consistent, and no exceptions**
- **Convey to them the sense that you care about them (and you should care about them; if you do not, you should reconsider your career choice)**
- **Do not burn bridges**
- **The syllabus is the course rules document. If there is something that isn't clear in the syllabus, students should discuss with instructor.**
- **Do not strive to be their buddies. They want to be respected and most want to thrive. (Of course if you end up being buddies, that may be OK)**