



TA / RA Conference on Teaching, Learning and Research Workshop Outline for Facilitators — 2011

Dealing With Difficult Classroom Situations

This session addresses some challenging situations that TAs might face in the classroom. You will learn about strategies to prevent and/or respond to issues such as disruptive student behavior, cheating and plagiarism, or student challenges to grades.

Objectives: By the end of this session, workshop participants should be able to:	Suggested Activities <i>Choose the appropriate amount of activities for your time frame.</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Determine issues central to difficult classroom situations.• Identify the goals they want to achieve in the interaction.• Develop strategies for responding to difficult situations.• Develop strategies for preventing difficult situations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Divide participants into small groups of three. Give each group a card describing a difficult situation (see attached handout for ideas). Have them discuss the following questions and record their answers on an overhead transparency or record them on a worksheet (see packet for worksheet):<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What issues are raised in this situation?• What would you do? Do you have any concerns about this decision?• How might you prevent this situation?(In this packet there is a table listing difficult situations and corresponding issues and strategies that you may refer to)✓ Have each group present their problem/solution. After each presentation, facilitate a large group discussion making sure to highlight key points and inviting other participants to contribute ideas about the situation.✓ Recruit a few volunteer actors to come in to your workshop to role play one or more of the situations, either as a “surprise” at the beginning of the workshop or as a substitute for reading one of the scenarios. Then discuss.✓ Use the Syracuse videotape <i>Dealing with Problems</i>, the online <i>Managing Conflict</i> site, or the <i>Managing Difficult Situations</i> DVD which show vignettes that present various difficult situations. After each vignette, facilitate a large group discussion about the issues involved and the strategies for responding and preventing the situation.✓ Divide participants into small groups and have them role play a difficult situation and the TA’s response.✓ To summarize, have participants reflect on key principles they should keep in mind when dealing with students in difficult situations (See handout).

Packet Guide

What this packet contains:

In this packet you will find 1) a list of resources, 2) potential problem scenarios to adapt as cards or handouts, 3) a worksheet for participants to record their findings, 4) a facilitator guide that identifies some considerations and strategies for problem situations, and 5) a possible handout for concluding the workshop. Please feel free to use and adapt this packet in any way you see fit. *Again, choose the appropriate amount of activities for your time frame (For a 60 minute session, this could be 1-2 activities).*

Using the packet:

- Participants have found it helpful to have UW-specific solutions presented during the session (e.g., what resources exist on campus to help me deal with X). There are many support services at UW that might be relevant to participants; a directory of these services is available in “Threatening Classroom Situations: Planning Guide for Faculty and TAs” (listed under Additional Resources).
- Feel free to make up your own scenarios, but it’s best to pick ones that are typical of TA experience.
- Don’t try to cover *too* many scenarios; one approach to using the scenarios is to pick three or four scenarios that are representative of larger issues (e.g. talking in class is representative of class disruption). After you thoroughly brainstorm issues and strategies for a representative scenario, you can quickly refer to other circumstances that might also pertain (e.g. cell phones ringing in class).
- Consider using a different approach for each scenario you discuss. For example you could present the first scenario, have participants write their ideas individually on the worksheet provided and then discuss as a whole group. The second scenario could be discussed in groups and then debriefed as a whole group. For the third scenario, you could give participants some time to discuss in pairs and let them know you will ask for role-play volunteers. After a pair has role played, discuss the role-play, asking for perceptions and responses from both the players and the audience
- Role-play typically works well in this workshop. You can use role-play for scenarios that require some tact and negotiation, e.g. grade complaints or a student asking a TA for a date.

Articles

- Braden, S. W., & Smith, D. N. (2006). Managing the college classroom: Perspectives from an introvert and an extrovert. *College Quarterly*, 9(1).
- Perlmutter, D. D. (2004). Thwarting misbehavior in the classroom. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 50(30), B-14. (See same article as, Perlmutter, D. D. (2004). What works when students and teachers both misbehave. *The Education Digest*, 70(1), 48-52.
- Seidman, A. (2005). The learning killer: Disruptive student behavior in the classroom. *Reading Improvement*, 42(1), 40-46.
- Sorcinelli, M. D. (1994). Dealing with troublesome behaviors in the classroom. In K. W. Prichard & R. M. Sawyer (Eds.), *Handbook of College Teaching: Theory and Applications* (pp. 365-373). Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Young, J. R. (2003). Sssshhh. We’re taking notes here: Colleges look for new ways to discourage disruptive behavior in the classroom. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 49(48), A-29.

Videos

- Kincaid, C. (Producer). (2006). *Managing Difficult Situations* [Motion Picture]. (Available from University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Office of Graduate Studies, 1100 Seaton Hall, Lincoln, NE 68588-0619)
- Roberts, A. (Producer). (1988). *Dealing with problems: Video vignettes to stimulate discussion of difficult situations* [Motion Picture]. (Available from Syracuse University, Center for Instructional Development, 400 Ostrom Avenue, Syracuse, NY 13244-3250)
- Rosen, C., & Fitch, R. (Creators) (n.d.). *Scenes From a Classroom: Managing Conflict*. Available at www1.umn.edu/ohr/teachlearn/tutorials/conflict/index.html

Additional Resources

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| University of Washington Student Conduct Code | www.washington.edu/students/handbook/conduct.html |
| Scenes from a Classroom: Managing Conflict | www1.umn.edu/ohr/teachlearn/tutorials/conflict/index.html |
| Threatening Classroom Situations: Planning Guide | depts.washington.edu/cidrweb/resources/safety.html |
| Promoting Civil Classroom Conduct | depts.washington.edu/cidrweb/resources/civilitytools.html |
| UW Safe Campus | www.washington.edu/safecampus/about/index.html |
| Managing Classroom Conflict | cfe.unc.edu/pdfs/FYC22.pdf |
| Handling Specific Disruptive Behaviors | cgi.stanford.edu/~dept-ctl/cgi-bin/tomprof/posting.php?ID=310 |
| Difficult Behaviors in the Classroom | honolulu.hawaii.edu/intranet/committees/FacDevCom/guidebk/teachtip/behavior.htm |
| Faculty Resource on Grading | depts.washington.edu/grading/index.html |
| Evaluating Student Learning | depts.washington.edu/cidrweb/TAHandbook/EvaluatingStudents.html |
| Undergraduate Advising at the Gateway Center: Academic Honesty: Cheating and Plagiarism | www.washington.edu/uaa/gateway/advising/help/academichonesty.php |
| Writing Centers | faculty.washington.edu/jwholmes/uwwrite.html
http://depts.washington.edu/owrc/ |
| Center for Learning and Undergraduate Enrichment (CLUE) | depts.washington.edu/clue/ |
| Instructional Center (Office of Minority Affairs) | depts.washington.edu/ic |
| Student-Athletes Academic Services | www.washington.edu/uaa/gateway/advising/about/saas.php |
| Disability Resources for Students | www.washington.edu/students/drs/ |
| Student Counseling Center | depts.washington.edu/scc/ |

Scenarios for discussion

(Adapted from Syracuse videotape, "Dealing with Problems")

1. You are trying to lead a class discussion, but everyone is just sitting there in silence. No one is participating. You tried calling on a student, but he said he hadn't done the reading.

2. You are in the middle of a lecture, and most of the students are paying attention. However, there are two women in the back of the room who keep talking to each other and won't be quiet.

3. It is the beginning of class, and you have just handed back the first exam. One student raises his hand and argues that the test questions were not like what they did in class. Now the rest of the students are joining in and complaining that the test wasn't fair, and that you didn't prepare them well enough.

4. A student tells you that it is very important to her to get a good grade, but that her partner is a slacker! She feels it is unfair that for him to receive the same grade as she does when she does all the work, and he doesn't do anything!

5. You are meeting with a student who has missed several classes. You can tell she is very depressed. She explains that she is having problems at home. Furthermore, she says that she is having difficulty adjusting to the university and feels she doesn't belong here.

6. A student is upset about his grade and comes to talk to you. You explain that a 2.8 is not a bad grade, but he is convinced that his project deserves at least a 3.5. As you talk, he becomes increasingly agitated and aggressive.

7. It is the seventh week, and a student comes to talk to you about his grade. He says that he has been trying really, really hard, and studying a lot for the class. However, he has done poorly on the exams. He asks if he can retake one of the exams or do an extra credit assignment.

8. You are giving an exam. One student whispers to the person next to him, then borrows his calculator. They pass the calculator back and forth. A little later, the student turns around borrows the eraser of the girl behind him. You think he is trying to look at her paper, but you're not sure.

9. One of your students tells you that she doesn't think it's fair that she has to be in your class. She is paying a lot of money to get an education from a real professor—not a graduate student who has never taught before and doesn't have a Ph.D.!

Write your own difficult situation!

Dealing with Difficult Classroom Situations: Worksheet

Situation	Issues to Consider	Strategies

Strategies (reference for facilitators)

Situation	Issues to Consider	Strategies
Students complain that the test or grading practices are unfair	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Could the students have a point? • How will you maintain your authority and credibility and at the same time communicate respect for and interest in student opinion? • Where is the right place and when is the right time to discuss this? • If the test was constructed by someone else, is it appropriate for you to discuss the issue with the students? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listen and ask clarifying questions even if students seem unreasonable. • Avoid getting into an argument. • If, after clarifying what the problem is, it is not completely clear to you how to resolve it, tell the student you need time to think. • If another instructor is responsible for the grading or the test and there is not a completely clear and obvious answer to a student's complaint, suggest that he or she talk to the other instructor. <u>Tell the student you will also mention it to the instructor.</u> <u>Avoid agreeing with students or defending the instructor.</u> <p>In your syllabus, state a policy that all grade complaints must be made in writing within a week.</p>
You realize you've given wrong information in class.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How will you maintain credibility and at the same time address the mistake? • Do the students need correct information immediately? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First of all relax – almost all TAs do this (and many professors) – and more than once! • Apologize briefly to students and explain the mistake. If it's important information, you might want to repeat your correction – both on the website, in email and in class, for example.
You can't get equipment to work properly in class.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How much class time do you want to take to try to make it work? • How crucial is the equipment to making your points for the day? • How can you maintain credibility? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Double and triple check that you know how to use equipment and that the equipment you are using works ahead of time. • Have a plan B in case the equipment doesn't work. <i>E.g. be prepared to use the board if power point fails.</i> • Sometimes students can help. • Avoid getting flustered. Make a joke if you're able to. Otherwise, do your best. If you can't get it to work, apologize and move on to Plan B.

<p>Student makes provocative or insulting remarks during discussion. (Or class discussion gets heated and unpleasant.)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you have ground rules for the course that this behavior is violating? • How can you continue to give the provocative student a voice and yet avoid validating their negativity or allowing them to abuse other students? • Is the student clearly unbalanced or out of control? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If you teach a course that has any potential for the discussion of strongly held opinions, discuss this potential in the first week of class and what stance you want to take on it .(E.g. “The question of the validity of evolution as a theory is outside the scope of our discussion in this course. The course is based on the premise that evolution is true and you will need to explain course content accordingly whether you personally believe in evolution or not.”) • Establish ground rules about how discussions are to be conducted. You may want to construct them together with students. • Look for a way to pull back from the emotion of the comment. (E.g. “This is a very emotional issue for many people. But let’s try to phrase things as objectively as possible. Are you wanting to make the point that...?” Or “It’s true some people feel this way, but many others don’t. Let’s step back and look at the history and the reasons why there is disagreement.”) • If the student seems truly out of control, ask him or her to leave the classroom. If he or she refuses, tell him/her you will call campus police. If he or she still refuses, call campus police or request another student to leave the classroom and do so. If you feel threatened or that an unstable environment has been created dismiss the class and have everyone leave. Your safety and the safety of your students always come first. Please see “Threatening Classroom Situations: Planning Guide for Faculty and TAs” on the CIDR Homepage.
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<p>One student dominates the discussion</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can you encourage this student to modify his/her behavior without discouraging other students? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take the student aside privately and thank them for their contributions to the class. Tell him/her you would like others to also contribute so you would like this student to hold off for a little. Possible suggestions for this student might be to: Wait until you call on him/her; limit his/her contributions to 3 times per class; after speaking once, wait until at least two or three other people have spoken before speaking again. • Have a system where you give out participation chips to students, say, three for each student. Each time a student speaks in class, they sign one of their chips. After all three chips are used up, they can't speak anymore for that class period. They then turn in signed chips for participation points. • Ask questions to certain areas of the class, "Can someone from the back row tell me..."
<p>A student challenges your expertise because you're a grad student.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why does the student feel the need to do this? Does it really have anything to do with you? • How can you validate the student without devaluing yourself or getting defensive? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listen to the student and ask probing questions – try to find out if there are underlying issues (upset about grades? Or?) and try to redirect the conversation to that issue (e.g. "Well it seems like your major concern is grading practices, is that right? Well let me explain how I've arrived at this grade. If you still have questions about it, you're welcome to talk to the professor/ my supervisor...") • Depersonalize the issue. "Well I can see why you might have some questions..." And then explain why the university considers grad students qualified to teach and what the university believes grad students bring to teaching. (Admittance to grad school and appointment as TA based on university assessment of capability; grad students often can bring fresh assessment, an appreciation for the undergrad learning experience, can remember, relate to it etc. have fresh perspectives on the discipline etc.).

<p>Students don't participate in class</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are the questions you're asking part of the problem? Are they <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - too narrowly focused or too obvious? - Yes/no questions rather than information questions? - Too difficult? - So broad students don't know where to begin? • Have students done the reading? Or have they done the reading but forgotten what they read? • Are students so confused about the material that they don't know how to talk about it? • Are students intimidated by other class members or by you? • When students have expressed ideas in the past that are logically faulty or wrong, have you responded in ways that make it clear that it's safe and even encouraged to take risks and make mistakes in your class? • Is it midterm time and everyone is exhausted? • Do you have "reflective" learners in your class? • Are students bored with the topics being covered? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diagnose the problem. Think through the possibilities and try making adjustments according to your assessment of the situation. If participation is an ongoing problem you might also want to ask students to take a few minutes to write about what helps and hinders participation for them. • Make participation expectations clear on the first day of class. • Ensure students have the background they need to discuss. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Give students time at the beginning of class to review reading or other material in pairs or groups. Give them specific questions to review with. - Send out reading or discussion questions ahead of time over email and ask students to come prepared to be called on in discussions of these questions. - Have periodic pop quizzes on the readings. • Make time for reflection by allowing students to talk in pairs or write for a few minutes before engaging in full class discussion. • Make opportunities for students to mingle with other class members to increase comfort and familiarity. • Create low-stakes exercises that require everyone to participate. (E.g. small group discussions, & jigsaws.)
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<p>Disruptive behavior: Students talking in class or cell phones going off or students watching movies on their laptops or students coming in late.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How disruptive is the behavior? Is it bothering you? Is it bothering students? • How prolonged is the behavior? How frequent? • What are the underlying causes for it? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analyze underlying causes. Are students talking because they have questions you're not making time to answer? Is there enough challenge and variety in your course to keep students interested? Are students late their previous classes are across campus? • Make policies on cell phone use etc. clear at beginning of quarter. • If students are talking, pause and stay silent until they stop. • Ask talking students if they have a question. • If students talk habitually in class, talk to them individually about it. • Talk to frequently late students individually about their lateness. • Give out important information or start quizzes at the very beginning of class and let students know you will do this. • Encourage class participation and develop activities that will keep students engaged.
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Before, During, and After Difficult Classroom Situations

- 1) Make your own expectations clear from the start and lead by example (your syllabus can help with this). It is easier to prevent rather than attempt to correct many potential problems.
 - 2) Explain your decision-making processes to the class so they can understand where you are taking them and why.
 - 3) Get to know your students (their learning styles, what they want from your class) and let them help you establish acceptable and unacceptable behaviors in the classroom.
 - 4) Don't lose your cool. Defuse the situation and try to find common ground if you can and lead things back to calmer waters.
 - 5) Learn from these situations and try to create/refine appropriate, meaningful responses.
- What else might you add to this list?*