Managing Difficult Student Situations

Abstract

The goal of this roundtable is to discuss examples of difficult student behavior and to share some ideas on how to handle them. The authors will provide examples of on ground and online situations that we have experienced and will invite the participants to share their experiences. We will discuss some general ideas of what instructors can use as support in these situations.

Keywords: online classroom, on ground classroom, difficult students

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Introduction

We have all faced situations where students challenge us in different ways. It can be not paying attention in class, taking over class discussions, or bullying others in a discussion board. These situations require some kind of response from us. This is difficult as we need to figure out the right kind of intervention one that will modify the problematic behavior but will assist the dynamic environment we want in class.

We remember instances in our first semesters of teaching and the sinking feeling that comes with one of these situations. It was further complicated by the need of having to think on our feet and react immediately. We have made many mistakes and even after many years of teaching we are stumped in how to handle some new situations. We have some tools but the students always find ways to amaze us.

This is why we want to hold a roundtable, first we want to share some of the solutions we have found and then we want to hear what challenges others have faced and what ideas they have to handle them.

The session will be highly participative and participants will walk away with some concrete tools to handle difficult situations.

Theoretical Foundation

We aim to provide participant with certain tools to manage situations that might come up in their classes. We have grouped the situations we have faced frequently in groups and suggested solutions from literature and our experience that will help handle them.

The first step should be to understand the situation and describe the situation clearly (Kuhlenschmidt & Layne, 1999). This is a valuable step since it will help us address the right issue, it can prove difficult for us as emotions might be high and you might be under time pressure to resolve the issue.

An interesting factor is to notice when the behavior is happening, our classes do not exist in a bubble but they are situated (Kuhlenschmidt & Layne, 1999). We might notice that issues come up repeatedly around certain times of the semester/class session. For example, in our on ground 16-week classes, we have observed a change in week 5. It seems that it is an inflection point where the students are becoming more aware of the work involved in their semester, they might be homesick, etc. We take the time during week 5 to point out the phenomenon and to remind students of the resources they have in the institution to help them navigate their feelings. Another inflection point comes during the last week, students are exhausted and painfully aware of finals coming up. Some universities have recognize this and either institute a “dead week” a week between the end of the semester and the beginning of finals, in our institution there is a kind of agreement to not have difficult topics covered during that week and mostly focus on reviews.

Student Engagement

Some situations have to do with student engagement. We all know think/pair/share, but what else can we do. The authors have been successful sending questions ahead of time for students to prepare. This is particularly helpful for international students and introverts. It allows students to feel more confident as they have had time to prepare the questions. But we have to remember to actually send them and use them. One of the authors would generally have a more free-flowing environment in the classroom and many times forgot to ask the preset questions voiding the whole benefit of the exercise.

Other ideas for engagement include: frequent quizzes (but that increases our workload), directly ask why the students are so quiet (risk that they will not say a word, happened to both of us), move around the classroom and try to make eye contact with everyone.

In the on-line classroom lack of engagement is even more challenging as most students do not have informal opportunities to share with other students ideas from the class, there is little to no support network (Tobin, 2001). One idea we have implemented is to have students introduce themselves at the beginning of the course, with a little information about themselves and their interest in the class. Also holding “office hours” through Zoom or other videoconferencing software where the students can interact with each other can be helpful. Although some of our colleagues have not had significant attendance to those sessions.

Classroom management

Issues of disruption in class, disrespect for others’ point of view, sharing discriminatory comments, etc., fall into the umbrella of classroom management. We have found that the best way to deal with these is to prevent them from taking place. Being clear and precise at the beginning of the class and in your syllabus of what is/is not allowed in class has produced the best results for us as well as for Schneider (1998). A statement of what is appropriate conduct and examples will be helpful. You can check if your University has a code of conduct, that can help you define the boundaries of acceptable behavior. Our University has, in theory, clear expectations of not being discriminatory, being inclusive and this extends to social media posts giving the instructor a strong backing from the University to define these behaviors, but the policies have not been applied uniformly with particular issues in the online and accelerated courses that have such a small time frame for investigations.

 Controversial Topics

At times we have to discuss controversial topics in class. How to best handle this is complex and might be related to the specific topic, but in general having people required to argue the opposite point (this helps perspective taking), writing down supporting evidence for the views on the board, and helping the students separate fact from opinion are key. If you want to truly shine in situations like these, you can help the students identify why they might be uncomfortable discussing these topics and help them realize that the world will not come to an end if they make their perspective clear (Lusk & Weinberg, 1994).

Specific Student Issues

At times we might find one or two specific students that are disrupting the class and/or you. You may have students who dominate discussions, not allowing others to bring in their perspectives, you may have students who are more/less advanced that the rest of the class, complain incessantly, dominate office hours, etc. This is a tricky one since at times there might be issues that particularly trigger you and might make it more difficult to handle the situation on the spot. Some of these behaviors build over time, you see it over and over again, and the more time you let it I happen the more difficult it will be to correct the situation.

A key element to handle the situation is to not let your frustration build, if you do you might explode at the student and making the situation worse. You should not deal with it in public but in private, make an appointment or ask them to stay after class (Kuhlenschmidt & Layne, 1999). Make sure to offer messages that are concise, short, and focused on the desirable action or target behavior. Use active listening, give them a way to save face and make sure there are clear next steps and/or expectations that the student understands.

Emotional Issues

Our students are experiencing increased challenges with mental health and those might manifest in our classroom (Crist, 2018; Roy, 2018). This is a delicate issue, as instructors we might not have the background or expertise to deal with these issues. Anxiety, depression and suicide rates are rising. We recommend reminding students of the resources available to them, reminding them that they are not alone and that it is ok to experience these kinds of challenges. One of us struggles with mental health issues and makes a point of sharing it with the students. The idea is two-fold, one, is to try to diminish the stigma of mental health issues and second, to show the students that it is possible to have a successful and satisfying career while experiencing those challenges. The students respond positively to it and feel closer to the professor.

Leverage your institution’s resources

It is important to familiarize yourself with the resources that your institutions offers. You should have the contact information for your title IX office, the campus security, the counseling office and the Dean of Students. You should also learn about the processes to report a student of concern, an issue of plagiarism, etc.

For example, our University’s code of conduct applies to online communications as well as what happens in the classroom, so social media posts disparaging a student would be covered by the expectations of the code of conduct. When a student is suspected of breaking the code of conduct or if there are behaviors like missing class over an extended period of time, we have a form that signals the Dean of Students of a problem and triggers a task force that will work on the situation, of course document everything.

There is also liability insurance for professors in case you get sued by a student. We know this seems excessive but we wanted to share all the resources.

Session Description

We will begin by sharing some of the situations we have encountered and how we handled them (successfully or unsuccessfully). These are listed in Appendix A. We will discuss how others would have handled them and whether they have experience similar situations (15 minutes).

We will then open the discussion for others to present challenging situations they have experience and we will brainstorm ways to handle them. (25 minutes).

We will present some of the things we have learned to support us through these situations. (10 minutes)

We will leave some time to answer questions and bring up other ideas on resources to support us (10 minutes).

References

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Appendix A – Sample Scenarios

Scenario #1

A small group of students often attends your class, but its members have not read the assigned readings, and therefore contribute little in discussions. They either stare into the middle distance or use their computers and cell phones.

Scenario #2

A lively class discussion has turned into an intense argument involving 4 ‐ 6 students. Hostile and damaging comments are being exchanged.

Scenario #3

A student is in your class and has been doing fine, but begins to miss classes, fails to hand in assignments, and generally is falling behind. You approach him/her after class and set up a time to talk to him/her. During this conference, he/she says: "I'm feeling totally overwhelmed by everything. My job is taking more time than I expected. I'm supposed to work 20 hours a week, but lately they want more hours from me, and now it's more like 30 hours a week. I'm behind in all my classes, not just yours, and I have a math exam next week. Besides that, I had a fight with my partner and I've had to move out of my apartment and find another place, so I've been busy with moving my stuff. Now, on top of everything else, I have this chest cold--I feel terrible. I just don't know where to start, or what to do next. I feel like dropping out of school."

Scenario #4

A mature student is trying to make an appointment with you to go over a test. He has confused the time and location of this meeting multiple times and so your final email to him mentions that the relevant information (e.g., office location) is on the course outline. When the student arrives at your office hours, he gives you a “life lesson” for 10 minutes about how rude your last email was and about how his life, as a mature student, is far more difficult than yours, and so he doesn’t have time to refer back to the course outline.

Scenario #5

You are reading a student’s writing assignment and she has addressed a rather serious situation (e.g., suicidal thoughts, victimization, committed an offence, etc.). It could be nothing, but you suspect that the student needs to talk to somebody.

Scenario #6

Being asked difficult questions which you cannot answer.

Scenario #7

At the beginning of the semester, a pregnant student informs you that she is due to give birth shortly after midterms and will need to make arrangements to make up coursework when she has the baby. 50% of your grade is based on participation. (If you do not accommodate this is considered discrimination by the University).

Scenario #8

A student in your online classes logged in at the beginning of the semester, but after that you never heard from her for 4 weeks. She did not post to discussion boards or handed in homework. Then suddenly you get an email from her asking why her grades are not in the gradebook. She insists she has been submitting work all along.

Scenario #9

When teaching online, it is common for us to present scenarios for the students and ask them “what would you do?”.  The expectation (that is clearly spelled out) is that students will take some time to read a few resources and educate themselves so they can come to the table with an informed opinion.  Most students do this.  However, about once a term, I will have a student who posts their reply of “what would you do” without any justification or research to back their action.  When an email is sent to explain that opinions must be informed, these select students will respond back with …..  “You asked what I would do.  I would trust my gut and not spend forever looking things up”.

 Scenario #10

I was teaching an online course and, as with most online classes, I started with a discussion board for introductions.  I always make it a point to reply to each student’s introduction.  One student shared that he had just finished his service in the military and had recently moved to our state.  In my reply I asked what he thought about the area and if he was enjoying his new location.

A day or two later, one of the academic advisers reached out and said that the student was upset with the class.  As normal, I reached out on the phone to speak with the student.  The student was very flustered and aggressive.  First, he “loudly” pointed out the fact that I did not thank him for his military service nor did I request the other students to thank him.  He then went on to explain all the sacrifices that he had made to keep me safe.  Additionally, he shared that he suffered from anxiety and PTSD and that I should be required to go through PTSD training (or else I was not qualified to be his faculty).

 Scenario #11

In marketing, I will share with students the statistics regarding organizational growth for those organizations that use videos and social media and those that do not.  Then, for an assignment, students are given the option to make an infographic or a video using specific programs.  For the specific programs, I give student the option of 5 different software programs that offer free trials.  I want them to see that with today’s software, almost anyone can create a great promotional video with a little practice.

While most students love this assignment and are proud of their creation.  I had one student request permission to not do the assignment because it violated FERPA.  According to her interpretation, asking students to do this assignment constituted a vender relationship with the software companies and as a student she was entitled to see a signed confidentiality contract with vendors that show they will not share her info.  I shared with her that she could set up a one-time-use email through Gmail or Yahoo to gain access to the free trial.  This was not good enough and she demanded to be excused from the assignment (while still receiving full credit).