Dealing with Difficult Students/Situations in the Classroom

John A. Nychka
Professor, Chemical & Materials Engineering
Vargo Teaching Chair
Associate Dean, FGSR, Teaching & Learning

The Recipe/Formula/Process

Be Humble
Be Honest
Seek Understanding
Overview

• In this session the topics of the "difficult student" or "difficult situation" will be explored.
• Various archetypes of students will be described through group discussions and reflection of personal experiences.
• Exploring reasons why certain archetypes might have particular behaviours that may appear to be difficult will be discussed along with ways of recognizing behaviours that may lead to classroom disruptions.
• Relevant codes and policies will be reviewed regarding what to do in difficult situations with potentially difficult students.

Intended Learner Outcomes

1. Be able to detect and differentiate between various archetypal characters in the classroom.
2. Be able to recognize, accept, and commit to the roles and responsibilities of a teaching assistant in classroom disruptions.
3. Be able to recognize and classify classroom disruptions according to university codes and policies, and take the necessary actions.
4. Be able to recall and apply strategies for students: with absences, not handing in work, wanting to make up summative assessments, requesting extensions, voicing disagreements concerning grading.
Archetypes

• Everyone is different, despite general common behaviours
  • Different archetypes are often observed in the classroom
  • Archetypes are **generalizations**, not stereotypes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Generalizations</th>
<th>Stereotypes</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Provide general characteristics based on cultural and social features</td>
<td>Present an incomplete, fixed, and inflexible image of a group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognize individual differences</td>
<td>Ignore individual differences</td>
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<tr>
<td>Help understand people’s behaviour from their perspective</td>
<td>Do damage when they are applied to people one does not know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E.g., I know that time is more flexible in Mexico than in Canada, so I will not interpret the late arrival of my Mexican students as disrespectful.</td>
<td>E.g., Mexicans are always late, so I will tell the Mexican students that the lab starts 30 minutes prior to when I tell everyone else.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table adapted from Lionel Laroche, Multicultural Business Solutions “Leveraging Cultural Diversity in Student-Faculty Relationship”

Why do archetypes matter?

• Give us models to work from re: understanding
• Think critically about differences between people
• Avoid unnecessary and awkward confrontations
• Allows preparation
• Awareness of existence focuses us on our response
• Meta-cognition (self-awareness)
What are some student archetypes?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Archetype</th>
<th>Talent(s) (what can be learned)</th>
<th>Perceived Negative Trait(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preachy</td>
<td>Like to share knowledge</td>
<td>Overbearing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silent-type</td>
<td>Deep thinkers</td>
<td>Not participating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argumentative</td>
<td>Critical thinking</td>
<td>Annoying</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What are some potentially difficult situations?

- Medical emergencies
- Environmental
- Violent behavior
- Disruption
- Suspicious behaviours
- Cheating
- Odors...
What are some strategies for dealing with difficult situations/students?

- Hold your temper (and your tongue)
- Document
- Don’t threaten with unchecked info (use factual info)
  - Set clear expectations and consequences
- Be open to criticism (how open?)
- Be empathetic
- Don’t take things personally
- Respectfully agree to disagree

https://teach4theheart.com/if-your-class-is-out-of-control/
Why do difficult situations arise?

• Because we are people
• Arguments
• Expectations and outcomes are unclear
• Mismatch in cultural expectations
• External factors (brought into the teaching environment)

Conflict Management/Resolution Strategies
Active Listening

• Stop talking.
• Prepare yourself to listen. Calm yourself; empty your mind.
• Put your personal feelings and prejudices aside.
• Put the speaker at ease. Removing distractions, the room and furniture setting, your body language are all important in this.
• Show that you’re listening. Pay attention, direct eye contact, manage your facial expressions, open body language.
• Listen to the speaker’s tone. Loud, reticent, scared, abrupt, threatening?
• Listen for what’s behind the words. Anger, frustration, confusion, sadness, terror.
• Observe non-verbal communication. Indicating the above.
• Be patient! Don’t rush them, finish their sentences, tap your foot, etc.
• Provide appropriate neutral responses and bridges to more explanation. “Yes?”; “Ah”; “...and then?”, “I can see how you think that”.
• Validate their feelings. “I can see that you’re angry.”; “I hear the frustration you’re expressing.”; “It sounds like you’re afraid for your children’s safety.”, I’m understanding that this made you disappointed.” (This is the scariest part of all: if you’re wrong, you’ll hear about it loud and clear!)

Qualities of instructors...

![Works to solve problems with students who exhibit inappropriate behaviours](image)

Different ideas on responses...

- Grace Under Pressure: Why Difficult Situations Speak the Most About You
  - [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/marjorie-clifton/grace-under-pressure_b_4065380.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/marjorie-clifton/grace-under-pressure_b_4065380.html)
- The Dreaded Discussion: Ten Ways to Start
  - [http://www.indiana.edu/~tchsstl/part%201/part1%20materials/The_Dreaded_Discussion.pdf](http://www.indiana.edu/~tchsstl/part%201/part1%20materials/The_Dreaded_Discussion.pdf)
- Argument
  - [https://www.powerofpositivity.com/how-to-win-an-argument/](https://www.powerofpositivity.com/how-to-win-an-argument/)
- Crucial Conversations
- Managing difficult classroom discussions
  - [https://citl.indiana.edu/teaching-resources/diversity-inclusion/managing-difficult-classroom-discussions/](https://citl.indiana.edu/teaching-resources/diversity-inclusion/managing-difficult-classroom-discussions/)
Underpinnings of Issues

- CONFLICT
- Cognitive biases
  - Knowing how we grow, decide, feel, view others, differ from each other, think, and speak helps us in our own learning and development, along with helping us to be better collaborators.
- Mismatched (or unclear) expectations
  - Expectation failures
- Fear and insecurity
- Stereotypes
- Differences
- ...

Fundamental Attribution Error

It is easy to think of our own behaviour as caused by events, and the behaviour of others as caused by their personalities.

Attribution is the psychological process of discerning the causes of things. We cannot see the intent in other peoples’ minds, nor do we see all the constraining circumstances which lead to others’ behaviour, thus we make attribution errors about others all the time.

If others are late for a meeting do you instantly judge the person with having poor time management? Overcoming fundamental attribution error requires us to reserve judgement and not place blame on others’ behaviour, and to first attempt to determine mitigating circumstances (i.e., ask!).

Adaptation of 3-second psyche notes and content from the book “30-Second Psychology: The 50 most thought-provoking theories, each explained in half a minute” Christian Jarrett, Editor; Prospero Books, Toronto, 2013
**Stereotype Threat**

<table>
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<th>Fearing that if we perform badly, other people will use that as evidence to reinforce their prejudices can cause us anxiety and make a poor performance more likely.</th>
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<td>Anxiety of what we fear people think of us can affect our performance.</td>
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<tr>
<td>If you fear that your performance will be used to reinforce stereotypes about you, the situation could unfortunately become self-fulfilling. Think about something you value to reduce stress, and fear of failure, when in situations where you sense that stereotype threat is imminent.</td>
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**The Bystander Effect**

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<th>The more people located at a given incident, the less likely we are to intervene when someone is in need of help.</th>
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<td>The presence of other people reduces our own sense of responsibility for a situation.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Don’t walk on by. If we all assume that someone else will do something to help, then a tragedy could occur. Make specific task lists in meetings to insure that each person knows their role rather than assuming someone else will do the work.</td>
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### Damasio’s Emotional Decision Making

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<th><strong>Do you make decisions using cool logic, or hot emotions?</strong></th>
<th><strong>Emotions are generally experienced somatically (physically), and the prefrontal cortex in our brains stores emotional information about decisions to help us in future decisions.</strong></th>
<th><strong>Try to make a cool, calm, considered decision, and it might be a poorer one than if you had allowed your emotions to kick in as well. Negative emotions about losing money can help us make good decisions, but can also confound decisions which are not the same.</strong></th>
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<td>Probably both.</td>
<td></td>
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### Wason’s Confirmation Bias

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<th><strong>We seek out and pay particular attention to information that supports our existing beliefs.</strong></th>
<th><strong>We have a tendency to refute contrary opinion by telling ourselves that opposing opinion was ill constructed or did not follow scientific principles.</strong></th>
<th><strong>To improve your decision making try considering the reasons against, as well as the reasons for, your current favourite.</strong></th>
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Scenarios

1. Absences
2. Not handing in work
3. Wanting to make up summative assessments
4. Requesting extensions
5. Voicing disagreements concerning grading

30.3.4 Inappropriate Behaviour towards Individuals or Groups

30.3.4(1) Disruption
30.3.4(1) a No Student shall disrupt a Class in such a way that interferes with the normal process of the session or the learning of other Students.
30.3.4(1) b No Student shall, by action, words, written material, or by any means whatsoever, obstruct University Activities or University-related Functions.
30.3.4(1) c No Student shall use words that incite others to behaviour that is inappropriate to members of the University Community, whether or not in connection with a demonstration, rally or picketing.

30.3.4(2) Discrimination
30.3.4(2) a No Student shall discriminate against any person or group of persons while participating in University Activities or University-related Functions. Discrimination is defined in the Discrimination, Harassment and Duty to Accommodate Policy in UAPPOL. (CLRC 25 APR 2013)

https://policiesonline.ualberta.ca/PoliciesProcedures/Pages/DispPol.aspx?PID=110

What do you do in a difficult situation?

1. Absences

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What do you do in a difficult situation?

2. Not handing in work

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What do you do in a difficult situation?

3. **Wanting to make up summative assessments**

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What do you do in a difficult situation?

4. **Requesting extensions**

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What do you do in a difficult situation?
5. Voicing disagreements concerning grading

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Where to get assistance

- Code of Student Behaviour (COSB)
  - Relevant sections
    - 30.3 Offences Under the Code
- Protective Services (780-492-5050) [https://www.ualberta.ca/protective-services](https://www.ualberta.ca/protective-services)
  - When to call:
    - Emergent health issues (after calling 911)
    - Students are displaying concerning behaviours (anger, rage, threatening)
- Helping Individuals at Risk (HIAR) (780-492-4372)
  - When you are concerned that a student may harm themselves or others
- Environmental Health and Safety (EHS)
Resources

• FGSR GTLP
  • https://www.ualberta.ca/graduate-studies/professional-development/graduate-teaching-and-learning-program/presentationsandtipsheets

• My UAlberta App: https://www.ualberta.ca/my-ualberta
  • Current info
  • Contact information for various offices
  • Emergency information


• Centre for Teaching & Learning
  • https://www.ualberta.ca/centre-for-teaching-and-learning/resources

Summary

• Before:
  • prepare, explain expectations, seek confirmation

• During:
  • be humble, be honest, seek understanding
  • question, listen, respond (QLR)

• After:
  • follow up, adjust, explain changes (if any)