

## Understanding and Responding to Challenging Student Behaviors

A common anxiety for new teachers is the prospect of having to respond to inappropriate or disruptive behavior in the classroom. Take a minute to read over the scenario below and consider what is happening in this class.

*Aaliyah Stewart is a TA for Introduction to Environmental Science, a course which fulfills a general education requirement. While most of her colleagues dread being asked to assist with a survey course, she loves the thought of being the person to get students interested in the discipline. She enjoys teaching and generally has a good rapport with her students.*

*Aaliyah always begins her Friday discussion sections exactly on time because there is so much material for her to cover. She delivers a very well-organized review of the content for that week using PowerPoint slides, giving her students thorough notes and using a lot of graphs, photos, videos, and other visuals to engage them. This week, she is reviewing for the midterm and wants to make sure that students have all the information they need to prepare for that exam. About 20 minutes into class time, Thomas arrives, walking across the classroom in front of the projector screen. He takes a seat with several of his friends and immediately begins talking about his plans for the weekend. Aaliyah stops talking, makes eye contact, and waits for Thomas to stop. When Aaliyah tries to return to her review, Thomas starts talking to his friends again. This time, Aaliyah firmly asks him to stop talking, reminding him that he can lose participation points for disrupting the work of the class. When the talking and laughter continue, Aaliyah walks toward him and asks him to leave the class. Thomas replies, "I paid for this course and I have the right to stay here." Aaliyah replies strongly, "Your behavior is disrespectful to me, and you are distracting your classmates. You do not have the right to prevent others from learning. I want you to leave this classroom right now!" Thomas still refuses to leave.*

What do you think about the way Aaliyah handled this situation? In what ways was her response to Thomas's behavior productive or helpful? What do you think she might have done differently? Let's analyze this situation more fully and try to come to a better understanding of challenging student behaviors.

### Recognizing the role teachers play in students' behavior

It can be easy to interpret behaviors like Thomas's as evidence that students feel entitled or aren't interested in learning, but attributing uncivil or disruptive behaviors to students alone can make teachers feel powerless to change them. When teachers feel disempowered, they often focus a great deal of energy and attention on policing students' conduct, which takes time away from learning and can create unnecessary tensions between teacher and students. Consulting the research on classroom civility can help new teachers think about the social dynamic of the classroom in a more productive way. This research suggests that teachers are not powerless, but in fact play a key role in influencing student behaviors, both positive and negative. Realizing this gives teachers the opportunity to re-imagine their responses to student behavior of all kinds, and in particular it offers a new framework for thinking about how we respond to classroom disruptions.

## **Responding effectively when disruptive behavior occurs**

Aaliyah's frustration in this situation is understandable: Thomas's behavior is distracting for her and likely for other students sitting around him. However, understanding that teachers have a role to play requires us to examine Aaliyah's response as well. While she did attempt to address the situation by subtly acknowledging the behavior and then asking Thomas to stop talking, Aaliyah ultimately let her frustration overwhelm her when these initial responses failed. This is an example of how emotions on both sides of a classroom exchange can become heightened, especially when teachers interpret student disruption as a sign of disrespect or as a personal affront. However, an emotional confrontation won't solve the problem of disruptive behavior; in most cases, it leads to an escalation of conflict and can ultimately damage the relationship between teacher and students. If you find yourself in a situation where students are engaging in disruptive behavior, try these strategies to avoid potential conflict.

### ***Take a deep breath and slow down.***

Instead of immediately reacting on the basis of the emotions you are feeling, give yourself (and your students) permission to stop for a moment. Giving students a break can reduce the tension in the classroom and also gives you an opportunity to prepare a more productive approach to the situation. Instead of asking Thomas to leave the classroom when he wouldn't stop talking to his friends, Aaliyah could have said something like this: "I know we have already done a lot of work today, and I, for one, could use a little breather. Let's take a 5-minute break to move around, and then I think we'll be able to refocus our attention."

### ***Depersonalize the behavior and think about students' perspective.***

It is especially easy for young or inexperienced instructors to take disruptive or inattentive students' behaviors personally and begin to resent their students for what they see as a lack of respect. However, when you take a step back and reflect, you can recognize that students are responding not only to you but also to a larger context. They might be feeling stressed or overwhelmed, or they may be struggling to keep up with what's happening in class. When you recognize that students' behavior is a response to the classroom environment but isn't about you as a person, you can more easily move beyond your own strong emotions. If Aaliyah had approached Thomas's behavior in this way, she likely would have been able to avoid the kind of confrontation that occurred.

### ***Whenever you are able, make a personal, private appeal to students who are engaging in disruptive behavior.***

When you confront students in front of their peers, they may be embarrassed and feel the need to perform for their peers by escalating a confrontation. If you engage students in a more personal way, they are less likely to be defensive. Instead of confronting Thomas in front of the entire class, Aaliyah could have talked to Thomas during a short break and said something like this: "Sometimes reviewing for exams provokes stress, but it's really important for us to maintain focus so I can make sure everyone's well-prepared. I'm concerned that you may be distracting others, so I would really appreciate it if you could not get involved in side talk. If you have any questions about the material, please ask because I'm glad to help. If we can all move forward with the review together, I think I can help everyone prepare well and succeed on the midterm."

***If you do initially overreact to students' behavior, you can still redirect your response.***

All the strategies above are productive initial responses to an instance of disruptive behavior, but sometimes teachers react too quickly, and they may find themselves in a situation where they feel like they can't back down. It is possible to change the course of the conversation without fearing that you're condoning disruptive behavior. After Thomas's refusal to leave the class, Aaliyah could have taken a deep breath and redirected the conversation by saying something like this: "Wow. We are all so stressed at this point in the semester, including me! I'm glad you want to stay in class so that you can benefit from the review. I want to make sure that everyone gets what they need from this, so let's see if we can work together to finish the review." You can also invite any students who were involved in disruptive behavior to stay after class for a moment so that you can make an appointment. This allows you to address the situation that occurred in class individually with those students when they aren't in a position where they feel the need to save face in front of their peers. This also provides another opportunity to remind the student that your goal is to support their learning by saying something like this: "I want us to talk again so I can make sure that you are on track. I know how stressful life can get, and I don't want that to get in the way of your success."

### **Creating a classroom environment that discourages disruptive behavior**

While it's important to have strategies for responding to challenging behaviors if they occur, it's even more important to think about how you will create a classroom environment that discourages those behaviors. When new teachers think about classroom management or civility, they often begin by asking how they will ensure that students behave appropriately so that they can learn. The problem with this way of thinking is that it ensures that teachers will focus their attention on policing student behavior. A better approach is to ask a different question: how will I create a productive learning environment for students in my class? When teachers focus on creating a learning-centered class, they direct their energy away from monitoring students' behavior and toward ensuring students' success in their course. Let's consider some strategies for building a learning-centered classroom.

***Make pedagogical choices that show students you care about their learning.***

If you reconsider the case above, you can see that Aaliyah is spending most of the time in her discussion section reviewing information while students listen. While she thinks this is the best way to help her students, research suggests that when too much class time focuses on the instructor lecturing, explaining, or demonstrating, students often become passive (Knepp, 2012). Students who don't believe there is any work for them to do in the class or, worse, that it simply isn't possible for them to keep up with what is happening, will find ways to distract themselves (and sometimes others). When you pause class regularly to have students engage in a learning activity, respond to a question, ask questions, review and recap their notes, or engage in a discussion, you can improve their perception of your willingness to help them learn. One easy-to-implement strategy for engaging students is called think-pair-share: you pose a question and ask students to write down their answer, ask students to share their ideas in pairs, and then ask some of the pairs to share their thinking with the whole class. Even simple learning activities like these can make a difference in the way students perceive their role in the class because they give

students the opportunity to become more involved in their own learning. They also give you helpful feedback about what students do and don't understand, allowing you to address misconceptions or make key clarifications. Ultimately, when you take the time to engage students, find out what they are learning, and respond to gaps in their understanding, you demonstrate to students that you care about their learning.

***Don't rely on rewards and punishments to guide student behavior.***

Teachers often believe that certain behaviors (like attendance, participation, or submitting work on time) will lead to student success, and they will often seek to incentivize those behaviors and disincentivize behaviors they believe will inhibit student success. While these are common approaches to trying to ensure appropriate classroom behavior, they can backfire for a number of reasons. First, they send very negative messages to students about their relationship with you. Focusing so much energy on policing behavior tells students that the teacher doesn't trust them and is waiting for them to make a misstep so they can be punished. Students may come to distrust a teacher who seems to care more about having them follow the rules than about their learning. Second, a focus on extrinsic rewards and punishments can actually reduce students' intrinsic motivation to learn. Finally, a system of rewards and punishments can put teachers in the position of grading student behavior rather than grading their learning; this means that the grades students earn may or may not have a strong correlation with the work they produce in a course. Instead of relying on rewards and punishments to guide student learning, focus on creating frequent opportunities for students to demonstrate their learning so that you can respond to their learning rather than to their behavior. For example, you might require students (for a completion grade) to submit a short writing at the end of each class in which they describe the three most important things they learned. Reading and responding to these short writings gives you an opportunity to assess students' understanding and also gives you the opportunity to provide feedback on their learning. This is very different from assigning an attendance or participation grade, which is really just about their compliance with a requirement you've set. When you keep grades focused on student work rather than on student behavior, you send a clear message that your job is to help them learn, not to control their behavior.

***Treat students with basic respect.***

Research has shown that students become very frustrated with instructors who they find rude, arrogant, condescending, or dismissive of students, and students will often act out in response to teacher behaviors that they perceive as disrespectful (Boice, 1996). Basic demonstrations of respect toward students like consistently speaking in a polite tone, learning students' names, and showing up for class on time go a long way toward showing that you respect students as people. But it's important, also, to show respect for students as learners. Using active learning strategies to engage students and assess their understanding (as described above) is a very important way to show students that you want to help them be successful. Another strategy is to seek feedback from students about what is or isn't helping them learn in your class. While there are formal measures for collecting extensive feedback from students (like ITLAL's [Early Semester Survey](#) service), there are also some simpler, more informal strategies to facilitate communication with students. For example, you might ask students to respond in writing to some basic questions like "What is one thing that is helping you learn in this class?" or "What is one thing that the

instructor could do differently to help you learn in this class?” Collecting this feedback just two or three times during the semester and responding to concerns can demonstrate that you respect students as learners and want to ensure their success. Students who feel respected are more likely to act in ways that demonstrate respect for their teachers and their peers.

### **Resources about student behavior**

Boice, B. (1996). Classroom incivilities. *Research in Higher Education*, 37(4), 453-486.

Knepp, K. A. (2012). Understanding student and faculty incivility in higher education. *The Journal of Effective Teaching*, 12(1), 33-46.

If you would like to learn more about creating a productive learning environment and encouraging positive student behavior, we invite you to [request a consultation](#) with ITLAL.