

IV. DEALING WITH DISCIPLINE PROBLEMS

At one time it was possible to say that problems with student misbehavior were rare because the students were a relatively select group who knew that a university was a place for adults to work and not for children to play; furthermore, since not all of the post high school population went to some sort of college, it was possible to come down very hard on all cases of misbehavior. Since some sort of higher education has become more of an expectation rather than a privilege, it is inevitable that discipline problems will develop and that some effort is needed to deal with them effectively.

You should also read the section in the UCR TA handbook (*The Next Step*) on maintaining control (pp. 71--72) for further advice on dealing with discipline problems.

Basic definition

Some instructors are not aware whether or not there are discipline problems in their classes. This is not as strange as it may seem at first. Much of an instructor's attention goes to matters other than monitoring students' behavior, cultural differences may make it difficult to know if behavior is out of line, and maybe the instructor is aware of some student behavior that is less than ideal but unsure if it is bad enough to be called a problem.

Discipline problems are forms of student behavior that disrupt the flow of the class or disturb the classroom atmosphere in such a manner that it is no longer conducive to learning for some or all of the students.

Note that acts of cheating are generally not disciplinary problems under this definition. Of course they are against university regulations, but usually they are done in a furtive manner that does not distract others.

On the other hand, the definition of discipline problems includes actions that are not necessarily misbehavior but are nevertheless disruptive. The most basic examples of this type involve excessive questions about fundamental concepts that are in fact prerequisites for the course; for instance, if one or two students in a calculus course are asking repeatedly to see the details of elementary algebraic manipulations and this is affecting your ability to cover all the material that should be treated during the class period, then there is a discipline problem.

Any instructor, even one with years of successful experience, can have discipline problems such as students disrupting the class through excessive talking or other difficulties described below. Even in the same class, differences in the student composition or the individual students can generate problems when none had existed in previously taught sections of the class. Experience often provides the ability to be aware of the development of a problem at an early stage as well as the ability to deal with the problem in a timely and constructive manner. Awareness of how to deal in advance with certain situations is often enough to avoid having the situations develop into major problems. Feedback from students usually comes too late to be useful; comments in teaching evaluations are not seen until the end of the quarter, and student complaints to "someone in charge" usually happen when things are so out of hand that it is too late to do much.

The amount and type of discipline problems vary from course to course. There tend to be more discipline problems in the algebra/trigonometry and precalculus courses than in others, and calculus courses for business and economics students tend to be more frequent than in the regular

calculus sequences. Courses taken by freshmen tend to have more problems, but courses taken by more highly motivated students such as honors courses tend to have fewer. Second year courses such as multivariable calculus have far fewer discipline problems, and, if there are any, most are due to the instructor. The reasons for such differences will be apparent when the causes of discipline problems are discussed.

Some general considerations

Before going into a more detailed listing of the general types of discipline problems and discussing their underlying causes and proposed remedies, it seems useful to give some basic advice. If a student is repeatedly disruptive (say frequently coming late, leaving early, interrupting you with irrelevant questions *etc.*), this should not be ignored. However, when confronting such a student, it is important to stay calm and non-accusatory. Simply state, preferably privately and after class, which aspect of his or her behavior you find disruptive and ask him or her to change it; for example, "It is disruptive to the entire class when you arrive ten minutes late and slam the door. We would all appreciate it if you would come to class on time." Avoid confronting students during class if at all possible; this makes the other students feel uncomfortable and undermines the class atmosphere. Do not let yourself be dragged into an argument. If the student's behavior persists you should talk to more senior personnel (more experienced TAs, primary instructor or other faculty, the Department Administration), and for serious cases requiring further action you should contact the Department Administration.

Talking in class. It should be emphasized that noisiness in a class does not necessarily imply the existence of discipline problems. There is nothing wrong with noise caused by students participating in what is going on in class, asking questions, answering questions, etc. In fact, there should be that kind of noise in class. On the other hand, talking by groups of students which makes it impossible for other students to follow the presentation and participate fully, or which is a symptom that some students are controlling the class, is a problem that needs to be dealt with. As before, it is unfair to the other students to allow groups of students to behave in such a disruptive manner, and you cannot expect the other students to deal with it or even let you know they are having a problem. It is sometimes sufficient to ask the students who are talking whether they have any questions (this is frequently what is going on) to make them stop. Asking students to "please be quiet" usually makes things worse. If the problem persists, try to determine who is the main cause and talk to him or her privately after class (see the previous paragraph). If this does not work, ask someone more senior for advice on how to deal with the problem.

Recognizing the existence of problems

Classroom visits by observers can often help make a diagnosis, but these are not always reliable. Such a visitor only observes the class for one period and it is often impossible to pinpoint the cause of what is happening in such a short period of time. Furthermore, students are also quite capable of behaving very well when a visitor is present, especially if that visitor is the primary instructor or a TA's discussion session or some other recognized person in authority. Many of us probably remember how the atmosphere in a high school class changed when the principal walked in for whatever reason. Therefore the instructor has the primary responsibility to monitor the classroom for possible problems. Ideally this should be part of the general effort to maintain effective student-instructor relationships (a topic discussed at length last quarter). Here are some things that might suggest the existence of problems:

- Who talks frequently to whom?

- How is that student doing in class?
- Who comes late?
- Is the class noisier when going over homework problems? When distributing or collecting homework or quizzes?
- Is the whole class hostile? Are a few individuals hostile?

Patterns of students' behavior might contain the answer as to why the students are behaving the way they are and what can be done to change the situation.

Some good news

Fortunately, almost all discipline problems fall into a few categories. The examples listed below are by far the most common ones:

- Students coming late.
- Students leaving early.
- Usually just) one or two students interrupting with a lot of irrelevant questions to the extent of disrupting the regular flow of the class and annoying a fair number of students.
- Students talking to their neighbors.
- Students passing notes back and forth.
- Students getting up to turn in homework whenever they feel like it.
- Students running/controlling the class.
- Students performing immature distracting acts like pulling other students' hair, yawning loudly, playing a walkman (fortunately these are very infrequent events).

Sometimes, but not often, the instructor contributes from the beginning on towards creating a problem; this will be discussed in the case studies. Usually, the potential for a problem is there and the instructor contributes towards its development.

The occurrence of discipline problems can be greatly prevented by the image and attitude an instructor projects from the first day on. Here are some examples:

- *Go to class early.* If you go to class before most of the students are there, you can in some sense take "possession" of the room. Incoming students get the message from your presence that they are entering **YOUR** classroom. Arriving after most students are there has the reverse effect; the students "own" the classroom and you have to "obtain" the use of it from them. For example, if most of the students are already there when you arrive, many of them will probably be conversing with each other, and under the circumstances they are less likely to cease talking when the bell rings than if you are already there when they arrive.
- *Have a clear class structure.* Establish a routine for returning homework, answering homework questions, collecting homework, covering new material, and so on. Students often feel more comfortable when they know what is going to happen than when things seem to happen randomly. Even the best behaved students can become uneasy and start conversing at length if they are unsure about what is going on in the class.
- *Do not be too friendly, especially in the beginning.* Projecting an image that you want to be the student's buddy, especially in the beginning, can lead to a very disruptive classroom atmosphere where students try (often successfully) to take advantage of you. Start out on a professional, friendly, but somewhat distant footing. You do not have to be overly authoritarian, but wait until later in the quarter to do more casual things like talk at

length about other subjects (say the basketball team) or make jokes. After a few weeks, when students have accepted you as being in charge, you can relax your attitude somewhat.

- Know your students by name. Being anonymous in a crowd is an invitation for some students to misbehave. If the students know that you know who they are, they are much less likely to act up.
- Conduct your class meeting so as to minimize the opportunities for disruption. Specific suggestions include returning homework personally instead of letting it circulate, collecting the homework in an orderly fashion according to an established routine, doing the homework questions the students want to see rather than those you think they should want to see (this was discussed earlier), and involving your students in the class so they won't have time to talk with each other.

Some bad news

Although there are some things an instructor can do to deter discipline problems, there is no way of ensuring they will never need to be addressed.

- Prevention will not always work. Even the best and most experienced instructors will face situations for which they could not have taken preventive action and which might easily become major problems if not noticed in time and dealt with in a constructive manner. The advice given above helps to create a positive classroom atmosphere, but students often have their own reasons (consciously or unconsciously) for disrupting the class no matter how good or experienced and skilled at preventing problems an instructor might be. Being able to recognize potential problem situations and knowing how to stop them from developing further are also necessary.
- Problems will not go away if you ignore them. They will usually get worse if ignored, so you need to deal with them. Every student has the right to expect an atmosphere conducive to learning and it is your responsibility as an instructor to provide it.
- You and not the students have to deal with the problems, and you have to deal with them well. As the instructor you are in charge of the class and you have to deal with problems. If you do not, the other students will feel that you are not doing your job. If, in the process of dealing with a discipline problem, you put a student down or treat him or her in a way that is viewed as being inappropriate or embarrassing by some of the other students, you will lose those students' esteem and trust, and they will be very reluctant to work with you. You might effectively "lose" your class. In extreme cases the intervention of someone else from the Department or Dean of Students' office might be necessary. Contact the Department administrative personnel if you feel this is the case.
- There is no universal way to deal with any of the problems that were listed earlier. The way to deal with the disruptive behavior of a student or group of students depends upon the reasons behind the behavior. Some of these may have to do with the way you teach or the image you project. The degree of hostility and the number of students involved are often good indicators for the latter. Other reasons have to do with the student and the course and still others have nothing to do with either. Again, paying attention not only to the type of behavior but also to patterns, frequency, etc. will give you clues as to why the behavior is taking place. In any case, it is extremely important to avoid showing anger and frustration in front of the students; this does not mean that you should not be angry or frustrated, just that you should not show it.

Why do students disrupt the class?

Here are some reasons why students may act in a disruptive way, ways in which they often manifest their feelings and possible responses. Some of the give responses assume there is no hostility and that you have not lost complete control of the class. As mentioned before, some have to do with the course, some with you as a teacher or person, and some with none of these. In general, it is a bad idea to express what you think the underlying reason for a student's behavior might be. Part of the problem is that you and the student have different perspectives, so it is quite possible that your interpretation is incorrect. More important, don't forget that your goal is to make the disruptive behavior stop without alienating the rest of the students.

Try to determine the degree of hostility that might exist and the number of students involved. As already mentioned, these are among the best indicators of what is happening.

The student has a need to impress you or the rest of the class.

- *Usual behavior.* Interrupting the class with a lot of irrelevant questions or comments, acting like the class clown, answering questions a lot — all of this in a non-hostile but rather ingratiating way.
- *Response.* In cases of clowning, talk to the student after class, try to acknowledge noticing him or her (without putting him or her down; *e.g.*, acknowledge his or her sense of humor if he or she makes jokes), explain that it is disrupting the flow of the class procedures and ask him or her to work with you by answering questions, etc. — In other cases, talk to the student after class, express appreciation for his or her participation, explain that it is not giving the other students the opportunity to answer questions, etc., enlist his or her cooperation to save questions till later and give others a chance to answer questions.

The student is at a point in life where he or she needs to challenge authority.

- For many students in lower division courses, this is the first time that they are away from parental authority and the first time they are free — say, from high school rules. They might have a hard time dealing with this freedom and accepting that you (who might not fit their previous image of an authority figure) are in charge of the class. The previous comments on prevention apply here in addition to the comments below.
- *Usual behavior.* Acting like the class clown but often in a somewhat more challenging way than in the previous case, trying to have other people participate in disruptive behavior, frequently questioning your authority (Why are we having a quiz? Aren't you going to drop our lowest score?), *etc.*
- *Response.* For the latter type of behavior, be firm but not overly friendly in your response indicating that you run the class, but avoid being dragged into an argument or an escalating confrontation. Saying that something is course policy or against course policy is the only justification needed, with referrals to appropriate personnel for further questions if necessary. If need be you can use a good guy/bad guy approach. For example, "I wish I could collect the homework after answering your questions on it, but it is a course policy [or the decision of the primary instructor] not to do so." — If the student tries to have others participate, try to turn these students' attention away from him or her by asking them questions and involving them in what is happening in the class. — Clowning behavior is harder to deal with here. Talk to the person after class, tell him or her in a firm way that the behavior is disruptive to the rest of the class, and appeal to his

- or her sense of fairness towards his or her peers. — Minimizing the chances for such things to occur by projecting an image of control from the beginning does work in many cases but it does not guarantee that you will not have to face such problems at some time.
- **NOTE.** The preceding does not cover the case where a student asks you outside class about dropping the lowest quiz score, giving him or her a makeup quiz or adding points to the score for an exam or quiz. These might also be done to challenge your authority, but the student might also have other, and in fact quite valid, reasons that you should hear. Such behavior on the part of a student cannot be labeled a discipline problem in the sense that it does not disturb the class procedures. How you deal with such issues depends upon the course policies, the student's reasons or explanations, or his or her behavior. Of course, if a student is unhappy with the way you deal with his or her request, the student might vent frustration by starting to disrupt the class.

The student feels insulted or humiliated that he or she has to take the course.

- Often a student hoped to be in a higher level course like their friends or acquaintances but was placed in — or had to drop down to — the course you are teaching. The student probably had this material before in high school and somewhere know that they did not learn it well enough, but still ...
- **Usual behavior.** (Depending on the level of resentment): Interrupting the class with many irrelevant questions or comments, acting like the class clown but in a way which is more directed towards you, yawning loudly, answering questions frequently with a tone of “This is so stupid, everyone knows this,” challenging what you say, talking to his or her neighbors a lot, coming late, leaving early — all actions that imply the attitude, “I should not be in this course.”
- **Response.** Talk to the student after class. If he or she is doing well now, give praise and express hope that he or she will continue to do well even when the material becomes more difficult. Try to explain that for some students the material is already difficult and that his or her behavior is preventing these students from getting as much out of the class as they should. Appeal to his or her sense of fairness or try reversing roles: “How would you feel if someone made it hard for you to understand what is going on by doing [specify some inappropriate behavior]?” Asking the student whether he or she has tried to test out of the course (chances are he or she tried and failed) might remind him or her that maybe there is a good reason for him or her to be taking the course. —
- If he or she is doing badly, give him or her a gentle warning that he or she needs to pay more attention to what you are doing in class. Suggest that he or she talk to his or her academic advisor about whether he or she should be taking the course.

The student does not want to come to class but has to be there to turn in the homework and/or take the quiz.

- **Usual behavior.** Talking a lot (but not in a way which is intended to upset you), passing notes, coming late, leaving early, etc.
- **Response.** Talk to the student, express sympathy, explain how distracting it is to the other students, appeal to his or her sense of fairness, reverse roles, and — if all else fails — find a compromise (give permission to have a friend turn in the homework and to come only to the class meetings when there is a quiz — of course at his or her own risk). Suggest that he or she talk to his or her academic advisor about whether he or she should be taking this course or whether he or she can try to test out of it. — If students complain that the class is too early or too late, suggest that they should consider changing

sections if this is possible since they are expected to be on time. Of course, no one but the students can control when they show up.

The student is new to campus, feels lonely, wants to make contact with his or her peers.

- Usual behavior. Talking a lot, passing notes, immature actions like pulling hair, acting like the class clown (but without any hostility towards you), *etc.*
- Response. Talk to the student after class, express sympathy, explain how distracting his or her behavior is to the other students, discuss role reversals, appeal to the student's sense of fairness.

The student is bored; he or she has seen it before.

- Usual behavior. Talking a lot, passing notes, sleeping, reading the newspaper, *etc.*
- Response. Try to involve the student more in what is happening in class; if he or she is talking and/or passing notes, do the same for his or her neighbors too. Talk to the student after class. If he or she is doing well, did he or she try to test out of the course? If not, send the student to his or her advisor. If yes, point out tactfully that he or she will eventually need to pay attention and is developing bad habits. If he or she is doing badly, give him or her a gentle warning that he or she needs to pay more attention in class. Explain how distracting his or her behavior is to the other students, discuss role reversals, and appeal to the student's sense of fairness.

The student is lost.

- Usual behavior. Talking a lot, sleeping (a symptom of having given up), asking you to repeat (again) what you explained, asking for all the steps involving prerequisites, trying to slow you down, *etc.*
- Response. Talk to the student after class. Explain that you cannot go over the material again and again, that help is available during office hours. Mention the possibility of getting a tutor (for some students free tutoring may be available). Encourage the student to talk with his or her academic advisor. **DO NOT** say that he or she has to drop the course. Explain that his or her behavior disrupts the class.

The instructor did something to upset some students.

- Usual behavior. Very similar to the student who is challenging your authority (*q.v.*).
- Response. You need to think back to what might have happened that upset the student(s).
- This might not be obvious since it is often a case of perception. For example, the student may have felt you were not willing to help him or her during an office hour or that you were rude answering his or her questions about an exam grade. — What to do depends upon what happened and how bad the situation is. If at all possible, trying to regain the student's trust and cooperation by, for example, offering extra help, or (if warranted) apologizing to the student about what happened might be indicated. Sometimes a suggestion that the student speak with someone in the Department Administration or switch to another section might be the most helpful. — However, it is better to err in the direction of inaction rather than doing something that aggravates the situation. For example, offering extra help might be viewed as a statement that the student is stupid or doing poorly and, since the student is already in a bad mood towards you, this might be very insulting.

The instructor is not dealing with the students' questions or difficulties.

- If there are questions or difficulties the instructor is not dealing with, the most disruptive behavior usually happens during the answering of homework questions and during the covering of new material.
- Usual behavior. A large number of students talk a lot, sleep, read the newspaper, ask you to repeat (again) what you explained, try to slow you down, come late, leave early. The students might be hostile, frustrated or extremely indifferent depending on whether they are angry, trying to improve the situation, or have given up without too many bad feelings.
- Response. You need to reassess how you are teaching. Review the readings from the Fall Quarter and the material to be covered this quarter on involving students during class.

The instructor is not sufficiently prepared, does not care, and/or is not doing a good job teaching.

- The usual behavior and response are the same as for the preceding item.

The student has problems that have nothing to do with the instructor or the course.

- Usual behavior. There can be many symptoms such as keeping a walkman radio going or yawning loudly, but often the student is withdrawn and very hostile (without the rest of the class being hostile).
- Response. If you do not sense any hostility from the student, you might want to consider asking him or her if everything is all right. This gives the student a chance to seek your help or advice. — Be careful not to get into the role of providing counseling of an academic or psychological nature. Refer the student to his or her academic advisor or other counseling units within the University for help. They are better equipped to help the student. — If hostility is present, it is not clear how one should proceed without having further information. Ask for advice.
- It is very tempting to avoid dealing with these situations, but it is important to remember that other students might get upset about your lack of attention to the situation if the student's behavior is sufficiently disruptive.

**What if EVERYONE seemed unhappy from the very beginning?
I didn't even have a chance to bore them!**

A student/teacher relationship is no different from other human relations in many respects. A wide variety of factors and expectations play a role on both sides. The diagram on the next page summarizes some of the various actions and reactions going on in a student-teacher relation. Sometimes you do not fit the expectations that some students have — these could involve gender, voice, physical build, ethnicity, age ... You come with strikes against you; of course this is not fair, but unfortunately it seems to happen, and at least one study on the students' perception of the TA provides evidence of this. How strongly a student reacts to finding out that you do not meet expectations often depends upon two factors; how much he or she is aware of what is happening and how much fear is involved. For example, a student who is scared about failing the course or not understanding what is going on might have his or her fears intensified immediately upon seeing that the instructor is "different." It sometimes triggers a flight response of transferring to another section.

There is not much you can do about having any of these strikes against you aside from not letting the situation upset your normal classroom behavior. However, being aware of them and of the way they might influence students' reactions and working on projecting an image of someone who is competent, in control of the class, well-prepared, organized, concerned about the students' progress in the course, *etc.*, will help you vanquish the problems. Some effort in building team spirit can be effective; for example, "My goal is to get everyone in this section to score 5 points above the class average on every single exam." Under the circumstances, doing anything that intensifies the students' fears can be fatal; *e.g.*, telling them that you just arrived in the country, that this is the first time you are teaching the course, or even using tentative expressions such as "I am not sure" or "I think this is correct."

Dynamics of student-instructor relationships

The following charts summarize some basic issues that arise in the interaction between students and instructors. These are modified from handouts used for training TAs in the Department of Mathematics at Purdue University.

INSTRUCTOR

perceptions of self as person/teacher	—→	expectations about students, class, self
perceptions of other as person/student	—→	fears, apprehensions
perceptions of how he/she is perceived as person/teacher		

STUDENT

perceptions of how he/she is perceived as person/student		
perceptions of other as person/teacher	—→	fears, apprehensions
perceptions of self as person/student	—→	expectations about teachers, class, self

CASE STUDIES ON DISCIPLINE PROBLEMS

Four examples of classroom situations are presented below, and comments on these appear afterwards. To test your understanding of the previous discussion, it is suggested that you read each of the examples and answer the questions below before reading the comments.

1. Is there a discipline problem? (yes/no/maybe/don't know) Underline key words which help you reach a conclusion.
2. Could the TA have prevented the situation from occurring in the first place? How?
3. What could/should the TA have done to prevent the situation from developing this far?
4. What should the TA do now?
5. Do you have any comments or questions about this example? How would you feel about this situation if you were the TA?

Example 1

The setting is the fourth or fifth week of the quarter in a two hour discussion course where quizzes are not given on a regular basis. The discussion instructor spends a lot of time preparing. He starts the discussion meeting with a review of the material covered in the class and then does several well chosen examples carefully on the board.

The first three weeks things went well; the students asked a lot of questions, and in fact so many that he had trouble keeping the meeting on track. However, now the students come 15–20 minutes late every meeting and several leave in the middle of the period when they find out that there is no quiz that day. Nobody seems to be paying attention to what the TA says. There is some generalized talking going on but nothing that can be pinned on anyone in particular. Sometimes there is laughter and it looks like the TA cannot help thinking that the students are laughing at him.

Example 2

(The TA is speaking)

Overall the class was going well except for one student, who will be called Mr. Malcontent. From the first day on he has been a problem. But it is not as if he does not participate or does not know what is going on. Actually he is always the first one to answer all questions and he does it in such a way that I start feeling uncomfortable about asking questions. He acts as if I ask very stupid questions that any three year old could answer. But the questions are not stupid for the students; I can tell from the homework that many of them have problems with this material. They also start feeling uncomfortable about the way Mr. Malcontent acts. Some of them used to try to participate but now they are just sitting there.

At one point Mr. Malcontent told me that his high school teacher taught him a much easier way to do some problem than the one I am using. The method he wanted to use worked for the specific example, but it was not right, especially in some cases that the students will see later. I tried to explain this but the other students seemed to think that Mr. Malcontent's method is indeed easier and now I have seen several of them using it on the homework. I am worried that it will cause problems for them later when we come to those other cases.

The other day, Mr. Malcontent was being particularly annoying. He had all his friends in class laughing at some dumb joke. I could tell that some of the students, who were trying to follow what we were doing, were getting really upset. I got angry and told Mr. Malcontent to stop, that he was annoying everyone, and that if he could not behave he could just leave the room. He did calm down, but he had a smirk on his face for the rest of the hour as if he had won the lottery. The class atmosphere was ruined. Nobody wanted to work with me, all because of this one student in the class.

Example 3

It is the third or fourth week of the quarter in a one hour calculus discussion class (the same scenario with minor modifications can be used in the setting of a lower level course). The TA explained on the first day of class that she wants the students to feel comfortable about asking questions whenever they have any, that she values their input and wants to tailor the discussion section to their needs. After all, she is there to help them understand the material better.

The class is going fine except for a couple of students. They seemed really pleased with the TA' s announcement, and they ask a lot of questions. They are always the first ones to bring up homework problems that they could not do. They often want the TA to repeat what was said and go over algebraic manipulations that the TA skipped. She patiently does so, but because of that she can only go over two or three homework problems before it is time to give a quiz (or in lower level courses start to cover new material). The rest of the class is getting bored and frustrated because there never seems to be time left for their questions. So many homework problems are never discussed. Last week the quiz was similar to one such question and a lot of students could not do it. When getting the quiz back today, the students were quite upset and it was hard to get them to quiet down and start the class.

The TA has tried a few times to ignore the questions coming from those two students. However, they are very persistent. They really want to understand the material but somehow this pattern of asking for questions and tailoring discussion to students' needs does not seem to be working.

Example 4

(The TA is speaking)

I was really looking forward to teaching this quarter. I received exactly the assignment I wanted; teaching my own class. I did really well teaching discussion sections and I enjoyed it, but I wanted to go ahead and teach my own class. I have great ideas on how to make this interesting and how to involve students, and I think it will work. I am all fired up.

Or at least I **was** all fired up. After the first meeting, I was not so sure any more. I was a little bit nervous before going to class the first day, but not much. I looked at the students before entering the classroom on the first day. They were talking to each other and some seemed to know each other already. Others were looking around, like freshmen wondering what they were getting into. Everyone was relaxed and seemed in some way eager for the class to start.

Seeing the students like that reassured me. I went into the classroom and said, "Hi." But after that ... Well, I still do not understand what happened. The whole class became quiet, very quiet — maybe even tense. They looked at me and it was as if they were all struck by lightning or something like that. It is the second week now. Some students, especially in the front two rows, are a little more friendly and they work with me. But no matter what I try, the rest of the

class still does not seem to want to have anything to do with me, except for some students who seem to be downright against me. I do not understand. I keep thinking and thinking but I still do not see where I might have gone wrong.

COMMENTS

There are no unique correct responses to the questions for the respective examples, but here are some possibilities. Once again, it would be best for you to try to answer the questions for each example by yourself first before looking at the comments below.

Example 1. “review of the material...”, “does ... examples ...,” “does not care ...,” “first three weeks...” are key phrases. The TA could have completely prevented this situation. He seems to have a prepared lecture, but no matter how good it is, that is not the purpose of a discussion section. In such sessions the main goal is to answer students’ questions. Students tried for the first three weeks to make this clear to the TA but failed. Now they have given up and are just in class for the quiz.

The TA should stop what he is doing immediately and take time to tell the students that he is changing his approach to conducting the sessions. It will take some time before many students are willing to believe him, but since there is no hostility on their part, chances are that he can regain their trust.

Example 2. Some key words here are *problem*, *feeling uncomfortable*, *worried*, *angry* ... etc. Since the instructor uses these words it is clear that he or she is fully aware that there is a problem.

It seems like a typical case of being challenged and to a lesser extent of being bored or humiliated. When the quarter started, there was no way that the TA to know that someone like Mr. Malcontent was in his or her class. However, the TA failed to detect the problem early on and to deal with it in a constructive way. Mr. Malcontent openly questioned the TA’ s ability and the TA did not respond well. By now, Mr. Malcontent has declared war and the TA fell for it. The smirk on Mr. Malcontent’ s face shows that he claims victory at least for that round.

When Mr. Malcontent came up with the allegedly easier way of solving the problem, the instructor should have given an easy example where Mr. Malcontent’ s method fails. If that was not possible, the best thing to do was to let it be for now, to caution the students and to tell them that it is up to them but it might be easier in the end to use a method which always works rather than to have to learn to see whether some other method can or cannot be used since they will not get credit if they use a method that is incorrect for the specific problem. The instructor can and should get back to the issue when the students are ready that it does not always work.

When the TA told Mr. Malcontent to stop, he or she lost composure and acted out of anger or frustration. This was not the way to deal with Mr. Malcontent. Even the students who were themselves annoyed with Mr. Malcontent felt uncomfortable at the confrontation and the atmosphere suffered.

Talking to Mr. Malcontent earlier on in private to see if he could test out of the course (since he thinks he knows best) might have helped. By now it might be too late to deal with Mr.

Malcontent. The best strategy might be to concentrate on gaining back the other students' trust and, to some extent, at isolating Mr. Malcontent while at the same time preparing for the next time he starts a battle (which will very likely happen).

Example 3. Although the TA could not have prevented these students from asking questions, she could have prevented it from becoming such a disruption. The TA, in her eagerness to involve students, neglected to have a clear picture herself as to which questions were appropriate and which were not. Doing some missing algebra steps in the beginning, pointing out that being able to do so is a prerequisite and that one will not keep doing them in detail, and sticking with this is necessary to give students a feeling of what is expected from them.

The TA should talk to these two students in private — they are probably going to office hours too or staying after class to ask even more questions. The TA should convey to them that they need to brush up on their prerequisites, that she will gladly help them during office hours, but during class she cannot and will not spend time on routine manipulations, and that in order to do well in this course they should be able to do these steps on their own. The TA might suggest that the students talk to their academic advisor(s) to find out whether this is the right course for them to be taking, or that maybe a tutor can help (in some cases special programs might be available).

After this, the TA should focus on the other students in the class by asking for all the homework problems and how many students want to see each one before answering any. By choosing problems that most students have questions on and by sticking to the suppression of routine algebra steps, the TA not only stresses the message given in private but also deals with the other students' frustration.

Example 4. This sounds like the sort of problem discussed under the heading: *What if EVERYONE seemed unhappy from the very beginning? I didn't even have a chance to bore them!* (q.v.). Some further suggestions would be to begin with a more formally with "Good morning," or "Let me start with the course formalities."

Final remarks

Recently some writers have replaced the term, "discipline," with the phrase, "classroom management." One thing in favor of this change is that the problems are not always caused by student misbehavior and conversely student misbehavior does not necessarily constitute a discipline problem in our sense (e.g., cheating).

One general suggestion for preventing discipline problems is to remind the students from the beginning that accomplishment of the course objectives is partially their responsibility. This can be softened by noting that while the students have certain responsibilities, at the same time they also have certain rights; in particular, you could give the students the notion that you are willing to entertain reasonable suggestions in connection with course materials.

Last but not least, if you suspect that a discipline problem involving student misbehavior is developing, **keep records of what is happening.** In particular, if misbehavior on the part of a student becomes habitual, a documented record may be valuable in supporting your observations.