

POSITIVE BEHAVIORAL INTERVENTIONS IN THE UNIVERSITY CLASSROOM

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General Principles

- *Prevent* behavior problems so you don't have to respond to them.
- Create a sense of community, so students are not anonymous.
- Communicate and review clear and reasonable behavioral expectations and consequences.
- Provide explicit examples of behavior you consider inappropriate
- Communicate high expectations for academic performance.
- Actively engage students in observable ways.
- Increase (and vary) students' opportunities to respond.
- Use a continuum of strategies to recognize student effort.
- Use a continuum of strategies to discourage and respond to misbehavior.

Preventing Problems Before Class

1. Prepare for emergencies. Have students complete a brief student information form that includes how to reach them by phone and whom to contact in an emergency. While you may not require it, most students will see the value in it. Show students the emergency evaluation route for your classroom, and ask them to save the campus police number in their cell phones. Encourage students to sign up for campus alerts.

2. Use your syllabus. The syllabus is essential to communicating behavioral expectations. For example, can you identify the expectations and consequences in the following syllabus excerpts?

Attendance: We will have wonderful discussions if everyone is present. Please do not skip classes! If you are not attending classes, this will lower your grade as follows: second unexcused absence reduces your grade by 10%; subsequent unexcused absences reduce your grade by 5% each absence. If you have an emergency that will result in your being late or absent, please let us know in advance. Students with perfect attendance may drop their lowest quiz grade.

You may want to add a policy for late arrivals. In small classes, you can call roll. In a large class, the policy would have to be different. For example, you might have a short activity that resulted in something being signed and turned in. (See unannounced assessments, below).

Participation: This course focuses on critical readings in the field. With that in mind, we need to be working together to discuss them. Participation is defined as: (a) being prepared to discuss the readings, (b) actively participating by asking and answering questions during class, and (c) actively participating in small group exercises or in on-line discussions. You will receive a participation grade that accounts for 100 points, or 20% of total points.

A few students may have social anxiety and not be able to speak up in class, so provide alternatives as indicated above.

Student rights and responsibilities. Consider having students sign and return a copy of the student responsibilities (<http://www.provost.pitt.edu> at your first class meeting. This reminds students about academic integrity.

Grades: You reduce the number of confrontations with students over grades when you are explicit in your syllabus. Consider using rubrics, exemplars, and non-exemplars to help students understand what constitutes satisfactory work.

3. Require the readings. Students who have not prepared for class may engage in off-task behaviors because they have nothing to contribute or cannot follow the discussion or lecture. Here, the syllabus addresses this problem.

Readings: Throughout the course, you will show that you are reading and taking good notes by demonstrating what you know in unannounced and announced assessments. These may be short quizzes, writings, notebook checks, or in-class exercises. Points possible for in-class assessments = 100, or 20% of the total points.

Some students do not complete readings because they cannot afford expensive textbooks. Consider e-reserve and other alternatives.

4. State the deadlines. To avoid arguments, publish not only the date an assignment is due but also the hour. For example,

Wikipedia Project: You must submit a draft for feedback anytime before 4:30 pm on 10/8. Final draft (two printed copies) due in class on 11/5. Published version due on Wikipedia web site by midnight on 12/10. Late submissions will not be accepted, so please plan your time and resources (paper, disks, printer cartridges, access to computer lab, time to proofread, etc.).

The submission and review of drafts can improve final papers and projects significantly, if you have time to review them. An alternative is to schedule peer reviews in class.

5. Communicate in your syllabus a plan for “stuff.” This includes food, drinks, cell phones, laptops, and other belongings. Each instructor has personal views on whether students should bring these items to class. If possible, engage students in a discussion about these items and their use in the classroom. If that’s not possible, then communicate your rationale for banning them.

“I am willing to let you bring snacks to class. However, last semester, I was the only one throwing away trash when class was over. So, please clean up if you want to maintain this privilege.”

“Laptop use in class is fine except when we are taking tests. However, the first time you use it for non-class work, your participation grade drops 10 points.”

“I know you may have emergencies and need to make or receive a cell phone call. Let’s discuss how we want to handle that.” [See the technology suggestions below.]

Do not set up a rule or situation that requires you to confiscate physical objects. These confrontations usually escalate hostility and are not safe. Instead, address a violation through a private communication or the grading policies.

Preventing Problems During Class

6. Make it personal. When students are anonymous, they tend to engage less and take behavioral risks. Consider this report:

“. . . faculty generally have found that large classes have poorer attendance, louder packing up of books a few minutes before the end of class, more cheating on exams, and more off-task behavior during discussions and group activities. They also report a startling array of innovative disruptive behaviors during class, including talking on cell phones, watching portable televisions, sitting through the lecture with headphones on, having pizza delivered during the middle of class, fraternity pledges’ pretending to have a nervous breakdown during an exam, and passionate making out in the back of the classroom. This incivility seems to be caused by the same mind-set that allows otherwise polite individuals to gesture rudely at other motorists in a traffic jam or shout obscenities at a referee at a crowded sporting event. The anonymity and impersonal nature of a large class can inspire students to behavior they would never dream of exhibiting in their small classes (Carbone, 1999, p. 35).

You can reduce anonymity by (a) learning students’ names, (b) using name tags or name cards, (c) calling on students from a roster, (d) asking students to say their names when they comment, (e) greeting students when they come into the classroom or as you move around the room, (f) assigning seats (but not the same seats all semester), and (g) creating “assignment sheets for dyads, triad, and other small groupings. Refer to these sheets as you supervise the students.

Designating in advance how students will work together has several advantages over the “Count off in three’s” method. First, you can pair students whose skills and knowledge will complement one another. Second, you can save time (See routines below). Third, you can ensure that the same students do not always work together.

7. Use routines and signals to make the most of instructional time. Establish and communicate (a) how students move in and out of the classroom, (b) how and where they turn in papers, (c) how and where they do small group activities, and (d) how they know to stop their discussions and turn their attention to someone speaking. Doing this at the beginning of the course can reduce time lost in transitions. Invite student input. For example,

“We have 200 people in this room, and we want to have lively discussions. On the other hand, we need a plan for how to end those discussions and move to the next activity. I don’t want to yell at you, so who has a suggestion?”

“We could stand up when we have finished.”

“You could hit the lights like they did in elementary school.”

“No, that’s stupid. We can hold up our cell phones like they do at concerts.”

“Or, we could each set our cell phones to go off when the time is up. Now, that would *be* a concert!”

8. Co-opt, don’t fight, technology. Students use and enjoy technology. Rather than create power struggles over it, incorporate it into your instruction. Here are some examples.

- After class, create and share a wordle to display students’ responses to a question, exit card or muddiest point (see below) (www.wordle.net). A sample is attached. Or, ask students to produce and share theirs with each other during or after class.
- Use cell phones in your classroom instruction. When students arrive in class, ask them to get out their cell phones and put them on their desks. Immediately, this reduces covert cell phone use. If students have unlimited texting (and most probably do), then invite them to respond to a prompt and screen you have set up in www.wiffiti.com. Students with phones can share with others. This site safeguards cell phone numbers with assigned pseudonyms (that remain constant across sessions), so you can track who is participating.
- Invite students to create and record podcast scripts instead of short papers. You can upload these and play them in class or through Courseweb (See http://www.cidde.pitt.edu/teachingtimes/2007_march/podcast.html).
- Invite students to create the slides for a lecture or review.
- Let students design classroom games based on popular television shows. You can use these to review course content after a unit or chapter. (See http://people.uncw.edu/ertzbergerj/ppt_games.html)

9. Actively engage students in observable ways. Studies tell us that psychological mediators of engagement include one's (a) beliefs about competence and control, (b) values and goals, and (c) social connectedness. Accordingly, it makes sense to incorporate activities that allow students to exercise some control and work with one another. Cooperative learning activities are not only instructive but engaging (see <http://edtech.kennesaw.edu/intech/cooperativelarning.htm> for ideas.) Here are some examples:

- Think-Pair-Share: Students first think alone about a prompt or question. Next, they share their ideas with a partner. Then, each pair shares its conclusions with other pairs.
- Jigsaw: Divide a reading into sections to read and discuss within the allotted time. Assign each section to a group of students. After they read and identify key points, they either (a) present their ideas to the entire class or (b) take part in a small group that has one member from each section.(www.jigsaw.org)
- Three-minute reflection: Pause a lecture to give students opportunity for a brief personal reflection. They may write or orally share their reflection with you/a classmate/entire class.
- Give students small dry-erase boards and markers. Then pose a short answer question and ask them to write their answers. You can scan the room to see their responses. This helps students too anxious to speak in class. (A source for reasonably priced small boards/erasers/markers is <http://www.dryerase.com>).
- Use the group tool and discussion board in Courseweb for on-line exercises between classes.

10. Pay attention to your physical surroundings. Use the space to support your instruction. If furniture can be moved, do it! Straight rows not only make it hard to have small group exercises, but they also seem impersonal. Try seating students in a horseshoe or circle. Using name cards, move them around so they get to know one another.

Always give a hostile person plenty of physical space (at least 3 feet). If you are concerned about an anticipated interaction, scan your environment (e.g., your office) and remove anything that could be thrown at you. Sit near the door.

11. Find out what's confusing. The National Academy of Sciences (2004), reporting on how adolescents become academically engaged, noted that students want teachers who can tell when students are confused. You can identify confusion by using quick surveys such a "muddiest point" or exit cards asking student to list three things they learned or want to learn or didn't understand. For example, "What was the muddiest, or most confusing, point in today's class? Write it on the card and leave it on my desk as you leave, please."

12. Get physical. Studies have demonstrated the positive effects of physical activity on learning---and on behavior. Brief physical activities, especially in classes longer than one hour, can break up classroom monotony and tension. Here are some examples:

"Place your hands on your desk (the table) and press down until you feel your feet coming off the ground. See how long you can hold that position."

“Let’s all stand up and stretch. Does anyone remember the little song, ‘Head, shoulders, knees and toes, knees and toes?’ ”

“Before we begin class, let’s each take three slow deep breaths, and focus ourselves.” (*This one can help the frazzled professor who has just made a mad dash across campus and needs a minute to recall the lesson!*)

“If you agree with the author, s-t-r-e-t-c-h both arms above your head.”

“Take a walk with your assigned partner around this floor of the building. Come back ready to report on your answer.”

13. Avoid coercive practices. These include (a) rules that are not reasonable, not necessary, not clear, or do not take into account the students’ perspectives. Research has shown that such coercive practices increase classroom hostility. There is a big difference between controlling people and controlling your routines, curriculum, and schedule. Students are more likely to cooperate when they see the reason for a rule and its connection to the instruction. Consider these examples:

“Everyone needs to sit in the first five rows. Please move down now.”

“Hey, folks, you can sit where you want, but if I can’t hear you, then I cannot give you points for participation. And you may miss some of the dialogue in the film we are seeing.”

14. Do not escalate the situation. Do not “corner” or raise your voice with a hostile student. Do not reprimand a student publicly. Research has shown that this increases behavior problems. Instead, call the student later to review what happened and make a plan for it not to happen again. Alternatively, suggest a meeting later in a departmental conference room or space where others will be nearby. When you delay the confrontation, you lower the emotional thermostat and decrease your risk of getting hurt.

15. Pay attention to psychological signals and behavior. If you feel unsafe or concerned about a student’s well-being, follow the University’s *Guidelines for Distressed Students*. Be sure that you control your own reactions so that you do not contribute to the problem. If you are concerned about a student, do not remain after class in an isolated area. If you feel safe, start walking and invite the student to walk with you.

Do not “corner” or raise your voice with a hostile student. Do not reprimand a student publicly. This increases hostility. Instead, call the student later to review what happened and make a plan for it not to happen again. *The student information form suggested earlier gives you a way to reach students for these private conversations.*

Alternatively, suggest a meeting later in a space where others will be nearby. When you delay the confrontation, you lower the emotional thermostat and decrease your risk of getting hurt (Kerr, 2009; Kerr & Nelson, 2010).

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[As requested by some faculty members at the plenary, here is the web site with guidance on classroom customs in different cultures:]

CultureCrossing.net

<http://www.culturecrossing.net/explore.php>

"CultureCrossing.net is an evolving database of cross-cultural information about every country in the world. This user-built guide allows people from all walks of life to share essential tips with each other about how to navigate our increasingly borderless world with savvy and sensitivity." [description from web site]

