

Random Thoughts . . .

ALL IN A DAY'S WORK

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It's a typical day in your class. As you lecture,

- ▶ *several students stroll in during the first 10 minutes of the class and one arrives after 20 minutes. It is the earliest she has arrived all semester.*
- ▶ *a number of students are absorbed in the campus newspaper.*
- ▶ *two students are having an animated conversation, punctuated by laughter. All heads around them are turning to see what's going on.*
- ▶ *one student has his head back, eyes closed, and mouth open.*

You are not thrilled by all this, but you're not sure what to do about it.

We sometimes present this scenario in our teaching workshops and ask the participants to brainstorm possible responses to any of these behaviors—not just good responses, but good, questionable, and terrible responses. Here are typical suggestions.

1. Ignore it.
2. Lock the door.
3. "YOU TWO SHUT UP!"
4. Fall silent and wait.
5. Throw chalk.
6. Set off a firecracker.
7. Flap your arms and cluck like a chicken.
8. Ask a question.
9. Leave.
10. Set fire to the newspaper.
11. Talk to the offender outside class.
12. Review the rules.
13. Start an activity.
14. Throw the bums out.
15. "That looks like an interesting conversation over there—why don't you share it with the rest of us?"

Next, we suggest that the *best* response depends on whether

the offending behavior is disruptive or non-disruptive—that is, whether or not it distracts the class's attention from your teaching—and whether it is a first offense or a recurring one. Non-disruptive behaviors include sleeping (without snoring), reading, or slipping into the back of the room late. You may not like it—seeing students asleep drives some instructors crazy—but it is not distracting to the other students. (Watching someone sleeping just doesn't have that much entertainment value.) Disruptive behaviors include talking or otherwise making noise, or coming in late and promenading ostentatiously up the aisle.

After making these distinctions between different offending behaviors, we tell the participants to get into groups of three or four and try to reach consensus on the best response for each category. We collect their nominations and then propose ours. Sometimes several groups nominate our responses; often none do.

You might enjoy making your own nominations before we tell you ours. In your opinion, what is the best way to deal with

- (a) *a student sleeping in class whom you have never seen sleeping before?*
- (b) *a student who sleeps in almost every class session?*
- (c) *two students talking and laughing who have not done so before?*
- (d) *two students talking and laughing who do so frequently?*

First indicate what you would do in class when you ob-

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serve the offensive behavior, and then add what (if anything) you would do outside class. *Hint:* One of our nominations is not included in the 15 listed ones.

Best response to non-disruptive behavior

If you do *anything* in class to address a non-disruptive behavior, you turn it into a disruptive one. Our suggestion for what to do in class about a sleeping (or reading or unobtrusively late) student is, therefore...*nothing*. If the student is a first-time offender, forget about it. If you notice the same student sleeping every period, you may continue to ignore it, or if it seriously annoys you, you might express your annoyance outside class and ask why he is doing it. If he is bored, knowing that his sleeping bothers you may get him to work harder at staying awake. On the other hand, if he is holding down a 40-50 hour/week job while going to school or is working the night shift, warn him that he could be missing important information and then stop worrying about it.

Sometimes someone suggests initiating a learning activity to get students' attention. We are staunch believers in active learning, but we want to use activities when they fit, not just because we happen to see someone sleeping.

Best response to disruptive behavior

Ignoring disruptive behavior is not a viable option. If you allow disruptions to proceed, they will become increasingly widespread and frequent until the class is out of control.

Our nomination of the best response requires some preliminary explanation.* Speech communication experts tell us that there are three categories of responses to objectionable behavior: *aggressive*, *passive (indirect)*, and *assertive*. Yelling at students, throwing things at them, and throwing them out of class are aggressive responses. Doing anything non-aggressive other than clearly stating what you want is a passive response. Calmly and clearly stating the problem and asking for what you want is an assertive response.

Do aggressive responses work? In the short run, they generally do. As an instructor, you hold a great deal of power over the students: if you scream at them to shut up, chances are they will. But while you may win the battle, you are likely to lose the war. When you resort to aggression, you effectively admit that the only way you can control your class is to lose control of yourself. You will lose the respect of the students, and the rest of the semester could be grim for both you and them.

* We are indebted to Rebecca Leonard of the N.C. State University Department of Communication for the analysis that follows.

What about throwing the chalk or an eraser? Everyone has stories—some fond, some bitter—about teachers they had or knew about who used to do that sort of thing. That was then; this is now. Can you say “law suit”?

Then there are passive responses. Ignoring those two chattering students—the ultimate passive response—is clearly a poor idea. Falling silent and waiting for them and other noisemakers to quiet down themselves might work eventually, but it wastes valuable class time (especially in a large class, where you might wait for a *long* time) and penalizes the non-disruptive students as much as the few miscreants. Locking the door penalizes chronic latecomers, but it also penalizes the one-time offender who may have a perfectly legitimate and unavoidable reason for being late.

Some professors argue for the ever-popular “Why don't you share that joke with the rest of us?” That is, first of all, a passive response. You are not asking for what you really want: the last thing in the world you want is to know what those two birds are twittering about. You know, and they know, and the rest of the class knows, that your goal is simply to embarrass them into quieting down. Will it work? Again, probably in the short term, but once you resort to sarcasm or anything else that has embarrassment as its objective you again lose respect that may be hard or impossible to regain.

Which brings us to our nomination: the direct, assertive response. Look in the direction of the offending students and calmly say “Excuse me—that noise is disrupting the class. Could you please keep it down?” They usually will. The talkers may be mildly embarrassed but your primary objective was clearly not to embarrass them—it was simply to quiet them down. You maintain control without having to use aggression or sarcasm, and the students' respect for your authority stays the same or increases.

Finally, what if you have to quiet down the same students in several classes, or the same student keeps coming in late? We propose doing the same thing we suggested for repeated non-disruptive behaviors. Talk to the offenders outside class, telling them that their behavior is offensive and must stop, and then ask them why they're doing it. Regardless of what they say, you will probably achieve your objective. In our combined years of teaching, we have never had to do this with a student more than once. Barring pathological cases, neither should you.

Interestingly, the assertive response—simply asking the offenders to stop doing what they're doing—is usually not on the list of possibilities brought up during the initial brainstorm. It's almost as if instructors don't know it's legal to do it. It is legal. And it works. □

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