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Thwarting Misbehavior in the Classroom

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After giving a midterm examination last year, I briefly considered quitting my lifelong job as a teacher. The stimulus was the declaration during the test by a student -- incensed at my "unfair" questions, which he characterized as "way too hard" -- that I was a "jerk." The young man spoke loudly enough for me to hear.

I was furious. Of course, like any educator, I've had students complain privately (in my office, on the phone, or through e-mail) that I am unfair, too rigorous, and a variety of other bad things. I never thought, however, that I would be reviled publicly in a university classroom.

I read the student the riot act, stressing the importance of respect for teachers, and generally declaimed his bad behavior to the heavens. I'm not sure whether the other students were more alarmed at the young man's rudeness or at my red-faced oratory. I did regain my composure enough to let him complete the exam.

Over the years I had sensed that student misbehavior was on the rise: rudeness, lateness, loudness, distractedness, and the myriad small sins that irritate teachers. It was not as if these young louts were protesting a war or engaging in some kind of civil disobedience; they were just plain rude. But although I have concluded that the decline in civility is due in part to factors beyond the professor's control, we can do something besides complain. We can learn from our colleagues who have developed styles of lecturing and interacting with students that help suppress misbehavior.

One insight that puts the problem into perspective is that there has never been a golden age of perfect students. For instance, the 1763 statutes of King's College of New York, now Columbia University, were compelled to insist that "none of the Students shall molest (by making unseasonable Noises, having Company at unseasonable hours or otherwise) either the President, Tutors, or their Fellow Students."

Furthermore, student unruliness is often in the eye (or ear) of the beholder. One senior professor commented that he thought wearing baseball caps turned backward was an affront to the dignity of the classroom; such a barometer had never occurred to me. But I can't tolerate anyone openly reading non-class-related material, and I regularly confiscate it. Another faculty member hearing me rant on that topic expressed amusement: "Why do that? At least they are reading something!"

In addition, I understand that the media world in which most American young people

spend many hours a day is the antithesis of the traditional classroom, or even what we used to call "adult comportment." We are competing with instant messaging and receiving instant judgments: It's as if every lecture is a new television show in which students feel that they should be able to use the remote control. Moreover, their conduct is regulated by the standards of *Girls Gone Wild* videos. Jeff Powell -- a Duke professor of law and of divinity, and recipient of the university's 2002 Scholar/Teacher of the Year Award -- sums up our challenge: If we don't entertain our students, "then they tune out. They also begin judging us right away."

Realizing that students have power in the classroom is a cognitive leap for many of us professors. Certainly when I began teaching, I saw the classroom as my savanna, and myself as at the top of the food chain. The students owed me respect, by golly. It took me some time to accept that from their point of view, the situation is quite different. One of my best and brightest students told me, "You have to win us over, not the reverse. You have to tell us what the game plan is and why we should follow it." In short, convince rather than command.

I resisted that message at first, but I buy it now. And I realize that flexibility is crucial. We are facing a generation of students with short attention spans, and we need to break knowledge up into packages that they can absorb. William A. Babcock, a professor of journalism at California State University at Long Beach, notes that "students expect commercial breaks. ... I try to not go any more than about 20 minutes on any topic without doing something different -- asking questions, using graphics, changing topics, etc. The key, though, for me is to have plenty of materials ready for any given class period, so that I might remain flexible and better able to address the needs and concerns of the students." The best teachers know how to read a room as well as to recite a lecture, and they shift gears when they see they've lost their students' attention.

Besides getting students to go along with our plans for a course, we must convince them that maintaining order in the classroom is in their best interest. Robert V. Friedenberg, a professor of communication at Miami University, in Ohio, makes a dollars-and-cents pitch for decorum, telling his class that "each student in the room has paid more for this class than for any concert ticket or sporting-event ticket that they have ever purchased."

Many approaches are possible. For example, graduate students in the humanities may appreciate a philosophical discussion of tactics to promote classroom etiquette, including comments about how they might handle unruly students when they start teaching. In other disciplines, it may make sense to tell students that they must behave in class as they will eventually have to in an office.

But offering practical reasons for being civil is not enough. We have to win students' hearts as well as their minds.

We obviously care about students or we would not be teachers, but we must prove to them that we care. That can be a challenge. In my case, students have often written on my evaluations comments like, "He can be very condescending." My reaction to such characterizations, until recently, was denial: Who, me? I'm just misunderstood. But I have accepted the fact that my body language and tone of voice can seem condescending even when I do not feel that way. An administrator suggested that I treat those crossed signals as a handicap I can overcome with effort; I've taken his advice and am working on the

problem. In fact, I have added to my lectures a discussion of how -- in work or personal relationships -- we can send unintended messages about our credibility and likability.

Every professor probably has some similar pedagogical handicap. By admitting that the problems exist and dealing with them, we demonstrate not professional failure or surrender to the students, but pure pragmatism. If we can convince students that we care about them, they are less likely to behave badly in our courses.

The acid test of a professor's caring is fairness -- what my angry student accused me of lacking. People who suspect that they aren't being treated fairly rebel through bad behavior, minor and major. We can demonstrate our fairness by explaining why we put certain books on the reading list and why we make particular assignments, what a student has to do to earn a certain grade, and why mutual respect is a necessary part of education. Students may accept tough professors, but they do not accept what they think is unfair.

I proved that point for myself in an inadvertent experiment several semesters ago. For a large lecture course, I had instituted what seemed -- and still seems -- to me a fair system of grading. Basically, the top 10 percent of the class got A's, the next 40 percent B's, the next 40 C's, and the rest D's. Of course, narrowing the range for A's was a protest against grade inflation. I'm a fuddy-duddy who believes an A should be reserved for outstanding work, and thus should stand out from the pack. My grading system's brilliance, fairness, and integrity were obvious -- but only to me. My students gave me low marks on my evaluation for "fairness of grading system," in spite of the fact that more students got better grades than in the previous class with the old system.

That experience taught me a lesson that I need to relearn often: Nothing about education is obvious to students. Most of us expect our students to have learned how to be students by the time they reach college. Yet many of my charges need help in learning how to study or write papers, as well as how a college classroom is supposed to operate. In high school, for example, they probably never took a course with 300 other students. So each semester I take more time to explain the basics. Not just in the syllabus -- I explain orally. Over and over.

The scores in my evaluations seem to confirm the importance of that point. Ever since I have taken extra time and syllabus space to explain and re-explain and justify my pet grading system in large lecture courses, my evaluation for fairness has risen markedly.

In short, if students don't like something about your course, you may not have explained it clearly or often enough.

Dealing with infractions is the other side of the coin of handling misbehavior. Students learn what is acceptable in class from what other students get away with. For example, recently a young lady asked to speak to me after class. She told me that she had had trouble concentrating because the student next to her had been watching a movie on a laptop.

I realized that I was partly at fault. My list of classroom dos and don'ts on the syllabus had not caught up to such a form of inattention -- I had noted that reading was distracting, but movie watching had not occurred to me. I commended the young lady for her interest in focusing on her studies and suggested she sit away from the other student in the future.

Then, in the next lecture, I observed that it was unfair to other students to distract them in class in any way. I said that if someone wanted to watch a movie, I could set aside a section of the room, and perhaps even open a concession stand. I got some laughs; I also received no further complaints about movie watching.

Humor certainly helps. I try to punish most low-level misbehavior with genial embarrassment. I might give a student who rushes into class late, slamming the door, a gentle quiz on how tough his day has been, or directions to a vacant seat. Most students will do anything to avoid being the butt of class merriment; I find few repeat offenders.

Of course, there is no magic elixir that will make students be civil to us and each other. I frequently remind myself that most students are, after all, very young, and still exploring how to behave. They are seldom malicious or consciously trying to undermine us or distract their peers. They just are growing up in a coarse and chaotic culture.

That was the case, I believe, with the student who called me a "jerk." He continued to attend class without further incident. A few weeks before the end of the semester, I found a handwritten note of apology from him in my mailbox. I believe it was sincere and not prompted by fear -- he was an A student. When I saw him next, I shook his hand and pronounced the case closed as far as I was concerned.

It was, I hope, a learning experience for both of us. Students will always misbehave. So will professors. But educators have a duty to encourage the best behavior in our charges. That task is as integral to our job as the content of any lecture.

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