Challenging Moments with Students: Elective Seminar

Seminar Description

In this interactive seminar, you will learn the best practices for assisting and teaching difficult students. Furthermore, you will hear from your peers with experience in the classroom about their own experiences and what they have learned.

Seminar Objectives

- To understand how to respond in a positive manner when students are upset and/or disruptive in the classroom
- To learn about campus resources that are available for students experiencing challenges that affect their classroom behavior or course performance
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Preparing for Student Challenges

As a Teaching Assistant, you will have the opportunity to work with undergraduate students who bring a variety of attitudes and beliefs to the classroom. While you should expect your students to demonstrate proper classroom decorum, you might also encounter students whose behavior is inappropriate for a college academic setting. For example, a student may refuse to complete assigned classwork, come to class tardy or leave class early, or become combative if he or she is upset about a grade. How should you respond to such situations? This document offers strategies for handling challenging moments with students in a productive manner.

Classroom Management
(Adapted from Svinicki’s and McKeachie’s McKeachie’s Teaching Tips (2013))

At the beginning of each semester, be sure to clearly articulate your classroom protocols in your course syllabus, and reemphasize those policies on the first day of class. These practices should assist you in establishing a comfortable and well-run classroom environment. Unfortunately, you might encounter students who undermine your policies. Consider the following classroom management challenges you may encounter, as well as strategies for overcoming them:

Inattentive students

Despite your best efforts to create an engaging lecture or facilitate a stimulating, seminar-style discussion, you might notice that a student has fallen asleep, or that a group or students are holding side conversations. In responding to such situations, consider the following practices:

- Re-think the material you are presenting. Are students inattentive because the lecture material is either too challenging or too easy? Does the lecture topic make students uncomfortable? You may need to adjust your either your topic or your approach to presenting the material if you find that students are not responding in the desired manner.

- Divide the class into small groups to work on a specific task. A small group environment may encourage students to engage with the material and remain focused throughout the class period. Be sure to move around the room during group tasks to ensure that students are completing the work you have assigned.

- Assign short writing prompts (i.e. a one-minute paper) and call on inattentive students to offer their responses. Doing so will show that you are attentive to that part of the classroom. Furthermore, short writing assignments push students to make a productive contribution to the class.
• Arrange a meeting with your inattentive student(s) outside of class. During this meeting, ask your students to articulate how they feel about the course and/or the material. Express your concerns about their inattentiveness, and brainstorm ways in which you might better engage the students in your class.

Argumentative students

You may encounter students who challenge everything you or other students say in class. Some argumentative students may simply be emotionally invested in the topic of discussion, while others seek to challenge your authority. The following strategies should assist you in working with argumentative students:

• Use student disagreements as opportunities to model scholarly debate. Listen carefully to what the student is saying, reflect on his or her assertions, respond in a civil manner with your own interpretation of the material being discussed, and initiate a compromise if necessary. If you do not talk over argumentative students or dismiss their ideas, the students may mimic your behavior.

• Consider inviting other students in the class to offer their ideas about the discussion topic. Hearing from peers may help argumentative students see alternative perspectives regarding the material. List comments on the board to ensure that all students’ ideas are acknowledged.

• Ask verbally combative students to meet with you after class. Explain to the students that their opinions are valued, but add that there are ways to articulate one’s opinions without hostility toward you or other students.

Students who arrive to class unprepared

For a variety of reasons, students may come to class without having completed the assigned reading, without laboratory materials, or without writing and note-taking supplies. Below are some strategies for addressing unprepared students.

• Stress, from the first day of class, that you expect students to complete all assigned reading prior to class. Consider giving unannounced quizzes throughout the semester in order to reinforce the importance of keeping up with the assigned reading.

• Conclude each class by giving students either a set of questions to consider or a task to complete prior to the next class. Doing so not only enhances the continuity of your course, but shows students that they will be expected to bring ideas to each class.
Students who are uncivil

Unfortunately, you may encounter students who is disrespectful toward you or other students in your class. The following strategies should assist you in working with uncivil students and preventing disruptions:

- Create a statement of unacceptable and/or acceptable behaviors for your classroom. Not only should you include this statement in your course syllabus, but you should reinforce the statement on the first day of class. Some instructors ask students to sign documents on the first day of class that attest to their understanding of course policies and proper decorum.

- Arrange the seating (if possible) so there is not much distance between you and the students, and so you may move freely around the room. Less distance between you and your students often curtails disruptive behavior.

- Speak with more experienced colleagues about how to handle disruptive students. Veteran Teaching Assistants and seasoned professors will often have tips for dealing with difficult classroom management situations.

- Ask uncivil students to leave the room if you sense that they are creating an uncomfortable classroom environment for you and other students. Calmly explain to those students why they are being asked to leave, state that you will contact them via email to discuss the situation.

- Contact Case Western Reserve University’s Police and Security Services (216-368-3333) if you feel that uncivil students may pose a threat to your safety or the wellbeing of their classmates. Consider discreetly handing a note to a trustworthy student that asks them to leave the room and contact security if you sense that tensions with uncivil students may escalate.

Emotional Challenges

At times, challenging students may be combatting emotional issues related to either their academic performance or personal lives. As a Teaching Assistant, you may come across the following emotional challenges in your courses:
Angry students

Some students may be angry at you due to dissatisfaction with grades or comments made in class to which they disagree. Moreover, students may choose to express their anger inside or outside of class. Svinicki and McKeachie (2013) offer the following suggestions for handling angry students:

- Attempt to become better acquainted with a student who is prone to anger. Consider setting up a meeting with that student to discuss a writing assignment he or she completed. Perhaps ask a small group of students—including the hostile student—to meet with you in order to make the atmosphere less threatening. During the meeting, ask the student to explain how he or she feels about the course, as well as what topics might be of interest. This conversation will show the student that you are committed to ensuring that he or she gets the most out of your course.

- Listen to the student in a respectful manner as your meeting progresses. The student needs to feel that you have really heard his or her concerns. Do not interrupt unless you need to seek an immediate clarification of a statement. Nod your head, and use other positive body language, which indicates you are sincerely interested in what the student has to say.

- Restate the issues, asking for clarification when necessary. It is your job to make sure the student feels you have listened with empathy and interest, and you clearly understand the issues.

- Respond to the issues in a firm, professional manner with a willingness to adjust a policy, a grade, or a response to an assignment when a student’s concern is legitimate.

Discouraged students

For first-year students, in particular, the demands of college courses are often greater than what they have previously experienced. If you notice that a student appears discouraged, try using the following tips:

- Refer the student to Educational Services for Students (ESS). Often, a student’s perspective on a course may change with new study skills and time management techniques.

- Offer both positive and constructive feedback on student work. While you should point out areas of an assignment that could use improvement, you should also note things the student did well in order to show that he or she is achieving some success in your course.
• Meet with the student during your office hours, and invite the student to express the difficulties he or she is having with your course. Suggest strategies the student might employ to be successful, and point the student to tutoring services available through ESS if you think extra assistance would be appropriate.

• Consider inviting students from the previous year or semester to come to your class and discuss any frustration or self-doubt they experienced, as well as ways they overcame their difficulties.

Dealing with Psychological Problems

A student’s emotional outbursts, belligerence, or moodiness may lead you to suspect that the student might benefit from psychological counseling. Consider asking a student to meet with you during your office hours to gain a better sense of how things are going outside of class. If you suspect that a student would benefit from professional help contact the University Counseling Services (UCS) Faculty & Staff Consultation Service at (216) 368-5872.

UCS outlines three levels of severity for distressed students:

• **Level 1: Support, Understanding & Challenges – General Counseling Referral to Helping Resources**
  When a student illustrates signs of mild depression, anxiety, moodiness, lethargy or other indications of mild emotional distress:
  
  Listen and offer support. Promote an open discussion to create an exchange of ideas and possible solutions. Assist in helping the student acquire accurate information and resources for additional help, for example, a referral to Educational Services for Students for tutoring or a Resident Assistant for more personal support. Challenge negative beliefs or misinformation and encourage continued dialogue with you and/or other helping resources around campus.

• **Level 2: Guidance and Assistance to Helping Resources – UCS Faculty & Staff Consultation**
  When a student illustrates or discloses signs of moderate and/or more long-term symptoms of depression, anxiety, moodiness, lethargy, poor concentration, absenteeism, alcohol or drug use, etc:
Listen and offer support, refer the student to university resources around campus. Help make the appointment by dialing the phone number with the student in your office. A Walk-In service (no appointment needed) is also available in the UCS in 201 Sears Building.

- **Level 3: Urgent Care & Emergencies – Case Police 216-368-3333 or UCS 216-368-5872**

  When a student demonstrates or discloses signs of severe or dangerous behaviors. Some signs to watch for include profound depression, thoughts of suicide, self-injury (cutting), frightening anger and/or threats of violence toward others; active anxiety attacks; cognitive confusion, incoherence, disorientation, or grandiose thoughts; or signs of excessive alcohol or drug use. Ask for assistance from an available colleague if possible as you call for immediate help.

Again, if you need immediate assistance with an emergency involving the safety of yourself, a student, or others on campus, please contact CWRU Police at (216) 368-3333. Furthermore, the UCS Counselor on-call may be reached at (216) 368-5872. This number will provide information on how to access the on-call system after hours, weekends and holidays. Weekdays, the UCS is open from 8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and is located in 201 Sears Library Building. Visit the UCS website at [http://studentaffairs.case.edu/counseling/](http://studentaffairs.case.edu/counseling/).
Work Cited


Additional Resources

Print


Electronic

